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**Rural Bengal : social structure and agrarian economy in the late eighteenth century.**

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**RURAL BENGAL: SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND  
AGRARIAN ECONOMY IN THE  
LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

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**KINGS COLLEGE LONDON**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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## Abstract

This thesis analyses the agrarian economy and social structure in the Indian province of Bengal during the late eighteenth century on the basis of the archives of the English East India Company. The major purpose of the subsequent study is to examine the central elements which comprised the fabric of rural Bengal, viz., landed property, peasant society, agricultural production, local trade and markets, in order to delineate the social relations which were embedded in the spheres of production and exchange. This is done in order to suggest that social relationships in rural Bengal were significantly altered in this period.

This thesis proposes that the late eighteenth century in Bengal was characterized by a conjuncture of certain economic and political forces. A succession of famine and dearth years exacerbated the impact of the conjuncture on life in Bengal's countryside. All these forces combined to create conditions of extensive commercialization, especially in the rice-producing, small-peasant economy of the province. This development emerges as the salient feature of Bengal's economy in the period under study.

Existing studies by modern scholars have also been examined in order to correct, what have been perceived here to be, certain inadequacies of historical analysis. This thesis, therefore, also enters into a debate with other historians over questions of landed property, stratification in peasant society and the economic context of food-shortages (famine and dearth) in Bengal in the eighteenth century.

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### Abbreviations

Add.Ms.: Additional Manuscripts

**BDR: *Bengal District Records*, Calcutta, various dates.**

BPC: Bengal Public Consultations

BRC: Bengal Revenue Consultations.

BRFW: Proceedings of the Board of Revenue at Fort William.

Brit.Mus.: British Museum.

BRP: Bengal Board of Revenue Proceedings.

BR Misc.: Proceedings of the Board of Revenue  
(Miscellaneous)

**CPC: *Calendar of Persian Correspondence*, Calcutta, various  
dates.**

CCR: Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee of Revenue

CCRM: Proceedings of the Controlling Council of Revenue at  
Murshidabad

Circuit: Proceedings of the Committees of Circuit.

Coast & Bay: Letters From Coast & Bay

Committee: Proceedings of the Controlling Committee of  
Revenue

FR: Factory Records.

**FR 2: *The Fifth Report on the Affairs of the East India  
Company, Volume II*, ed.W.K.Firminger, Calcutta, 1917.**

Grain: Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, Grain Branch.

Home Misc.: Home Miscellaneous

IOL/IOR: India Office Library/Records.

Khalsa: Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, Khalsa Branch.

LCB: Letter Copy Books of the Resident at the Darbar.

Ms./Mss.: Manuscripts

PCR: Proceedings of the Provincial Councils of Revenue.

**PP: *Parliamentary Papers, Reports from the Committees of  
the House of Commons.***

**WBDR, n.s: *West Bengal District Records, New Series*,  
Calcutta, various dates.**

WBSA: West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta.

## Preface

This thesis is an analysis of rural Bengal, its social structure and agrarian economy, in the late eighteenth century, ca. 1765 to ca.1794 on the basis of the revenue records and other papers of the English East India Company and its officials. Obviously, the sole dependence on Company records means that the conclusions remain largely tentative till a more substantive reconstruction is attempted by using indigenous sources too. Nevertheless, the Company archives are by far the largest single body of evidence available on the economic history of Bengal. They also contain vast amounts of hitherto unutilized information on the essential elements which shaped the fabric of rural society and economy: dearth and famine, landed property, the peasantry, agricultural production and local trade.

The central purpose of the ensuing discussion is to demonstrate that Bengal underwent an unprecedented degree of commercialization in this period. There is no doubt that in previous decades the province was pervaded by intricate commercial networks linked to the trade in textiles. Later (i.e., in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) Bengal went through a significantly new commercial phase under the impact of indigo, jute and tea. Nevertheless, there seems to be a strong case to argue that while the early eighteenth century textile-based commerce set the tone of a long-wave of commercialization, it was the late eighteenth century which provided the distinctive departure by bringing about the commercialization of the province's *rice producing economy* and of the social relations which were embedded in it. The clearest indications of these developments are the rapid proliferation of a sharecropping

peasantry in this period (discussed in chapter 4) and the increasing intervention of the grain-merchant (*byapari*) in agricultural production (see chapter 6). Many factors contributed to this development-- demand, prices, revenue, dearth and famines-- which are discussed in chapter 1, and the details of the process, both social and economic, are discussed in subsequent chapters. The diffuse strands of my argument are then tied together in chapter 7.

The fact that there exists a fairly rich historiography for Bengal in this period necessitates that any discussion must, among other things, engage in a dialogue with it. Therefore, one of the purposes of this thesis is to correct some imbalances in the existing interpretations. Three areas have been identified where such imbalances exist.

First, there is an excessive preoccupation with the revenue administration of the East India Company. I argue (in chapter 1) that revenue by itself does not explain much about the economy. It has to be situated in the context of agricultural production for any kind of comprehensibility to emerge.

Second, there is the question of famines and dearth. The sole concern of historians so far has been with the disastrous impact of the famine of 1769/70 on, what is seen, as an economy based on traditional forms of subsistence security. This thesis argues that the intensity of the famine of 1769/70 was significantly less than what has been hitherto argued. It is also suggested that the events of 1769/70 have to be situated in relation to other famine and dearth years in order to study the consequences of harvest-failures in a commercialized economy where access to food was determined, not by traditional subsistence-security systems, but by the fluctuations in food-supply and market-prices.

The third area of historiographical disagreement is over the questions of peasant-society and stratification. This thesis disagrees with the views which argue the

existence of a rich peasant "class" in the late eighteenth century and the increasing bargaining power of a mobile peasantry after the famine of 1769/70. What is suggested instead (in chapter 4) is the existence of a largely undifferentiated peasantry operating under extremely resource-constrained circumstances which proved conducive for the penetration of non-peasant strata (the landed proprietors and the *byapari*) into peasant production, which appears as the distinctive feature of the late eighteenth century commercialization in Bengal.

It is also necessary to state what this thesis does not attempt to do. There is very little in the subsequent pages about land-revenue administration, the role of the East India Company or about the "drain of wealth" from Bengal. These have been touched upon only to the extent of tracing their influences on the actual workings of the rural economy. They have not been dealt with as separate problems. The reasons are twofold. First, the major contours of these matters are fairly well established. Second, there is an absolute necessity of going beyond these issues in order to reconstruct the structures on which these administrative and exploitative edifices were based. This is not to deny the central purpose of the Company's rule after 1765, which was to use Bengal's resources for complex commercial, military and political purposes, but to study that exploitation (undoubtedly one of the dominant themes of extant historiography) divorced from the material milieu of production seems a largely pointless exercise.

There is also very little in this thesis about the cultivation of the "cash crops" such as mulberry, opium or indigo. These were commercial products *par excellence*, and their vicissitudes have been quite exhaustively documented by other historians. Additionally, these were more closely associated with the *international* movements of Asian trade. My concern is with those commodities which had the most direct bearing on the daily lives of the people. Chapter 5

therefore is an attempt to reconstruct the patterns of production of crops related most closely to the *internal market* of Bengal. Cotton has figured in this chapter because it was essentially designed for internal consumption despite the international demand for piece-goods. Ninety percent of Bengal's cotton cloth was manufactured to supply Indian markets (see chapter 6). By contrast, silk was almost entirely an export commodity. This is clearly in evidence from the declining trend in Bengal's silk exports to Surat between 1765 and 1789 and the rising trend in the Company's investment for that commodity between 1765 and 1780. These are outlined in figure A (p.11).

Unpublished and contemporary printed works have been given full citations in the footnotes, while secondary sources are cited in the following fashion-- name of author, year of publication followed by the page, or chapter, number. Full references are provided in the bibliography. Place names have been corrected (e.g., Rungpore to Rangpur) except when they figure in quotations or specific references. For instance, Dacca has been referred as Dhaka in the text, but the old name is retained where ever it occurs in the records or in quotations.

My debt of gratitude to numerous scholars for their help and encouragement is enormous. Professor P.J.Marshall supervised this thesis. This work is a small token of gratitude for his sharp insight, patience and kindness. Professor Burton Stein, Professor David Arnold, Dr.Terry Byres and Dr.Peter Robb gave my ideas the benefit of their sharp comments. They were also ungrudgingly generous with their time and friendship. Professor Harbans Mukhia, my teacher of long-standing, nurtured my initial attempts at historical research and sustained it with his constant interest in my work.

The Association of Commonwealth Universities and the British Council provided me with the opportunity of researching in England for three years. The Trustees of the

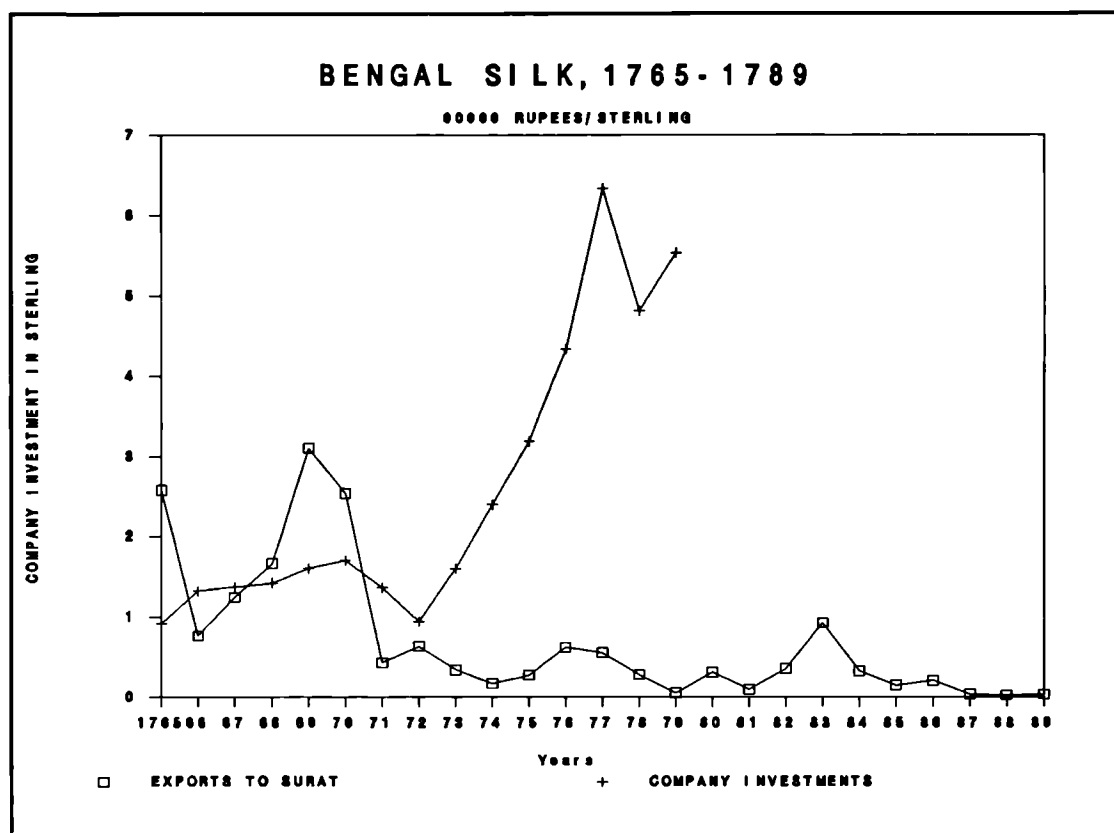


FIGURE A

Source: Surat, IOL Mss. Eur.D. 281, f.14; Company investment, *PP, Ninth Report, 1783*, p.112.

University of London Historical Trust Fund gave me financial assistance towards the costs of producing the thesis. I am grateful to these organizations. The members of the British Museum Library and the India Office Library provided the documents for my research with great kindness and efficiency.

Ratna and Rhea saw me through me with their love and understanding. My parents encouraged me with their constant affection and blessings. It is only appropriate that this thesis be dedicated to them.



## CHAPTER 1

### **A Framework for Bengal's Agrarian Economy in the Late Eighteenth Century**

For too long existing historiography has tended to view the late eighteenth century in Bengal as a period of crisis when the supposed agricultural prosperity under the *Nizamat* was irrevocably halted by a combination of state (i.e. the East India Company's) exploitation and the disastrous famine of 1769/70, an event, which according to consensual wisdom, decimated 10 million people or one-third of the province's population and unleashed a prolonged agricultural recession. The essential focus of such studies therefore hinges around the quantum of revenue imposed and collected by the state and not on the actual operation of the agrarian economy. Therefore what is characterized as the economic history of the province is actually its revenue history, or at best a history of changes in the structure of landed property between 1765 and 1793<sup>1</sup>. While there is no denying the important role performed by the revenue squeeze in the provincial economy, there is a pressing need to contextualize that role in the overall framework of economic, mainly agricultural, production. Revenue is a form in which the surplus is appropriated by the state, but it is the mode in which that surplus is created which provides the crucial insight into the domain of production.

This is not to say that the entire range of history writing for this period is encapsulated in matters pertaining to revenue. Laudable efforts were made by

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<sup>1</sup> N.K.Sinha, 1968; B.B. Chaudhury, 1983: 86ff.

Ratnalekha and Rajat Ray to lift the dead-weight of state-taxation in an attempt to reconstruct the network of social relations which constituted Bengal's agrarian economy. From a description of land tenure they shifted our focus into Bengal's economic and social structure and to rural power configurations. The picture of agrarian society which emerged from their studies was of a society polarized into two contending classes, the *zamindar* and the *jotedar*. The latter category was variously described by them as the "village landlord" or a rich peasant "class" whose foundations were laid in the economic boom of the early eighteenth century, but who actually came into full form in the late eighteenth century because of the revenue policies of the East India Company and the dislocation caused by the famine of 1769/70<sup>2</sup>.

The thesis proposed by Ratnalekha and Rajat Ray is provocative and analytically stimulating, but one which nevertheless embodies a number of historical problems. I have developed a critique of their model elsewhere<sup>3</sup>. Briefly, their analysis poses four essential problems. First, their view that the *jotedar* was an established social class in the late eighteenth century tends to read the situation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into the eighteenth with very little historical justification. Second, their assumption that a rich peasant "class" actually existed in the late eighteenth century is not borne out by the sources. Third, they have very little to say about the actual milieu of agricultural production while discussing the emergence of the *jotedars* over two centuries of British rule in Bengal and their sources for the eighteenth century are confined to two districts (those of Rangpur and Dinajpur) where a *jotedari*-type social relation seems to have emerged in an extremely rudimentary

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<sup>2</sup> See Ratnalekha Ray, 1979; Rajat and Ratnalekha Ray, 1975; Rajat Ray, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> R. Datta, 1989.

form. Fourth, their suggestion that Bengal's agrarian social structure was composed of two contending social classes positioned over a mass of landless and low-caste peasantry is misleading, not only for its convenient simplicity but also for its almost total absence of historical evidence. I shall return to all these issues when discussing the problem of peasant stratification in chapter 4 of this thesis.

There is therefore a pressing need to analyze the specifics of Bengal's rural economy in the late eighteenth century but within a conceptual framework which creates a meaningful context in which that economy operated. Thus the essential idea of this chapter is to construct some points of reference and conceptual parameters in order to establish a context for the analysis of Bengal's agrarian economy in our period. It is, in other words, an exercise in establishing a central point of reference which will set the tone for the issues to be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

#### An agenda for the study of late eighteenth century Bengal

The central purpose of this dissertation is to suggest that late eighteenth century Bengal (ca. 1765 to ca. 1794) underwent a number of structural changes in its agricultural economy and rural society. These changes were caused by a conjuncture, in this period, between four crucial factors. The first factor was the revenue regime established in the province after 1765. The second one was the changing linkages between the state and the market brought about by the political transition in the province. The third component was the growing demand for food in the province, and the fourth element in the conjuncture was an apparently fortuitous cluster of dearth and famine years

between 1769 and 1793. The order in which these factors have been listed does not reflect each one's hierarchical importance in the conjuncture, but it is intended to delineate the political and the economic in that configuration of forces and events which shaped Bengal's economic life in our period. The net result of this conjuncture, I propose, was to lead the province into one of its most intense phases of commercialization, the uniqueness of which was the commercialization of its *rice producing small-peasant economy* .

The general tendency, implicit in the works of historians like N. K. Sinha and B.B.Chaudhury, is to view this period as antithetical to the commercialization of Bengal's agrarian economy. Commercialization of agricultural production is therefore located in those sectors (like opium and indigo) which were structurally linked to a world market<sup>4</sup>. S.Bhattacharya's study of marketing structures and internal trade in eastern India<sup>5</sup> is an excellent attempt to analyze the processes of commercialization which were set in motion by internal trade (itself a long neglected subject in Bengal's historiography) but his study is nevertheless limited by an overt emphasis on the autonomous role of trade largely dissociated from the context of agricultural production, or from the forces which influenced the ebb and flow of commodities in the market and the strategies which were designed by the merchants to reduce the inconvenience which these fluctuations could cause to them.

On the other hand we have the tendency to see commercialization as a state-induced phenomenon. This approach is epitomized in Irfan Habib's writings on the society and economy of medieval India. For Habib, the crucial variables in India's pre-colonial economy are the state's drive towards increasing centralization and the

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<sup>4</sup> B.B.Chaudhury, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> S.Bhattacharya, 1983.

maximization of surplus appropriation in cash. Both these variables lead to the formation of a "cash-nexus" in the economy which leads to a process of commercialization under conditions of accumulation characterized by a "dominant mode of rent-extraction" by the medieval Indian state. All other forms of economic activity are henceforth relegated to "certain subordinate modes of accumulation"<sup>6</sup>. Habib's thesis therefore presupposes that commercialization can only come into existence under conditions of political stability, and that economic growth or retardation are essentially functions of the state's will. It is this latter assumption which has led Habib into postulating that merchant-capital in Mughal India was essentially parasitical as it depended exclusively on state demand for its sustenance<sup>7</sup>. Despite Habib's essential differences with the historiography of W.H. Moreland, he nevertheless shares the same premise with Moreland (the primacy of the state, for instance) in explaining the economic history of India from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century<sup>8</sup>.

Commercialization is an ongoing economic process by which the entire *structure* of production and circulation of commodities become linked to a market. It also entails an irreversible integration of people's lives (i. e their social reproduction) with the market and with the agencies who control access to such institutions. In fact the *survival* of a whole set of people comes to be *entirely* linked to the vicissitudes of markets and prices. Quantities and modes of sale (whether enforced or

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<sup>6</sup> Habib, 1983-85: 68-73. Habib's postulates are echoed in a recent study by K.N. Raj who says that commercialization in pre-colonial India "corresponded only to the requirements of a traditional 'revenue' economy [which] happened to be an indistinguishable mix of tax, tribute and land rent" [Raj, 1985: viii].

<sup>7</sup> Habib, 1971.

<sup>8</sup> For a similar critique of Habib, see Frank Perlin, 1983.

spontaneous) are therefore not the only phenomena in a commercialized economy. Equally crucial are matters relating to the amount of commodities which people are able to buy back from such markets, and the procedures involved therein. Even a temporary withdrawal from the market (caused by high prices, inadequate supplies or mercantile strategies) therefore invariably leads to severe crises of survival and production for a whole range of consumers and producers, including peasants. Additionally, commercialization must inevitably be accompanied by social differentiation.

The postulate that only a spontaneous sale of the producers surplus can be construed as a normal process of commercialization made, for instance by Amit Bhaduri<sup>9</sup>, apparently assumes that only stable conditions are conducive to a process of this type to come into being. Such an assumption overlooks the power of hazards and uncertainty as the other important factors in commercial growth. The influence of risk is particularly vital in understanding economic decisions in pre-industrial societies because of the influence of weather on production and the absence of firm infrastructural devices. Risk breeds uncertainty, which in turn leads to the creation of networks and strategies to cope with them and to circumvent them as well. But these strategies are not inimical to a commercialized economy; they can be vital to its existence and development.

It is in the context sketched above that I make the

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<sup>9</sup> For Bhaduri, "normal" commercialization can occur only when an increasing amount of the producer's *surplus* is *marketed spontaneously*. "Forced" commercialization comes into existence when various forms of coercion are used to *compel* the producer to sell a high proportion of the *gross output* to meet a variety of pressures. Bhaduri also accepts that these processes can become "intertwined in a complex manner in concrete historical circumstances"; yet the nature and significance of this complex interaction is inadequately addressed by him, despite its critical importance for the comprehension of specific social formations [Bhaduri, 1985:309].

following hypothesis about Bengal's agrarian economy in the late eighteenth century. The regime of the East India Company and the political-economy of Company rule intensified the formation of a regionally integrated market in the province, not only for high-value commodities like cotton or silk, but for basic food-grains. Appropriation of revenue was integrally linked to the expansion of Bengal's internal market. But this expansion was more than just the exercise of the state's political will. It was a product of a rising demand for food in the province at prices which were now linked on a provincial scale. The instances of dearth and famine (including the massive famine of 1769/70) were integrally linked to this prevalent demand for food in an integrated market. Though these phenomena were caused by partial or general crop failures, their significance and intensity can be fathomed only from looking at these events as severe dislocations in the food-market and the price mechanism. They also forced society to make structural adjustments in their aftermath. These adjustments were necessary for one stratum to cope with its problems and for another to circumvent unforeseen difficulties which resulted in the creation of different economic strategies by all social groups in the countryside. The net result of these strategies was to lead agricultural production into an unprecedented degree of commercialization.

#### Bengal's economy and the factor of demand

That the influence of town demand, and the rising trend in prices had a clear effect on local trade in agricultural produce is increasingly coming into focus<sup>10</sup>. Contemporary observers talked eloquently of the increase in

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<sup>10</sup> P.J.Marshall, 1987:13-14; P.J.Marshall, 1988:27-29; R.Datta, 1986:381, 387.

Calcutta's population throughout the century<sup>11</sup>. Dhaka had about 450,000 people living within its environs in 1765<sup>12</sup> and continued to be thickly peopled later on<sup>13</sup>. In 1757 Murshidabad was declared as "one of the richest cities in the world"<sup>14</sup> and in 1764, Robert Clive described the city of Murshidabad as "extensive, populous and rich as the city of London, with this difference that there are individuals in the first possessing infinitely greater property than in the last [named] city"<sup>15</sup>.

Apart from these premier cities there were other towns which were positioned at medium levels of consumption and had their combined effect on trade. Bhagwangola, near Murshidabad, handling about 18 million maunds of grain in the 1760s<sup>16</sup> was one such centre. Azimganj in Hughli was another, having grown during the early eighteenth century as a centre of the grain trade between Murshidabad and southern Bengal: "being one of the first gunges and established under a powerful patronage, it was invested with extensive controul [sic]" was how it was described in 1773<sup>17</sup>. Then there were the towns like Katwa and Kalna in western Bengal which, along with Calcutta, redistributed grain from the eastern parts of Bengal (like Jessore) to other parts of Bengal and Bihar<sup>18</sup>. Chinsura, a prosperous trading settlement, was "thickly interspersed with houses

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<sup>11</sup> P.J.Marshall, 1977:24.

<sup>12</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol.465, p.146.

<sup>13</sup> Datta, 1986:287.

<sup>14</sup> IOL, Francis Mss.Eur.E.12, f.250.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Clive, *An Address to the Proprietors of the East India Stock*, London 1764, (IOL Tracts, vol.113), p.19.

<sup>16</sup> J.Z.Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events Relative to Bengal and the Empire of Indostan*, Part 1, London 1766, p.194.

<sup>17</sup> IOR, BRC P/49/38, 23 March 1773.

<sup>18</sup> IOR, BRC P/51/20, 7 May 1788.



and small gardens" in 1778<sup>19</sup>, whereas Chittagong was described as a "very large and extensive town" in 1789<sup>20</sup>.

The demand for food generated by these towns exerted a crucial influence on the direction and movement of local trade. The average monthly consumption of common quality rice in Calcutta was 250,000 maunds in the 1780s<sup>21</sup>. Murshidabad needed more than 130,000 maunds of rice and 57,000 maunds of paddy for its sustenance in the 1790s<sup>22</sup>. Towns lower down the scale needed proportionate amounts of food. Unfortunately these needs cannot be worked out even in the most tentative fashion because of the scarcity of relevant statistical information. Quantitative data of the amounts of money involved in the purchase of food and other items of consumption are equally scarce. The fragmentary bits of evidence which are available may perhaps allow the following purely tentative reconstruction.

J. Paterson, commissioner at Commilla, calculated that a "Hindoo family in respectable circumstances" consisting of 16 persons, including dependents, spent roughly 333.50 rupees per year on food<sup>23</sup>. This would give us an annual per capita consumption of 20.54 rupees. This figure closely approximates to the evidence from Rangpur where Francis Buchanan's (later Buchanan-Hamilton) estimates of the domestic consumption of "seven ranks" of people circa 1807 gives a crude per capita consumption average of 21.02 rupees a year<sup>24</sup>. The population of Bengal and Bihar in 1790

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<sup>19</sup> IOR,CCR P/67/70,30 April 1778.

<sup>20</sup> IOR,BRP P/71/70,29 June 1789.

<sup>21</sup> IOR,BRC P/51/17,4 March 1788.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid,P/52/50,19 October 1792.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid,P/51/12,19 October 1787.

<sup>24</sup> In Rangpur the "seven ranks" of people in society having a total of 66 persons,including dependents and servants,spent a combined sum of 1387.43 rupees a year on food [ Francis Buchanan,"Account of Rongoppur",IOL,Ms.Eur  
(continued...)

was stated to be 22 million<sup>25</sup>, of which 12 million may have been the share of Bengal<sup>26</sup>. Multiplying the latter figure by the lower rate of 20.54 rupees, we arrive at a purely tentative sum of 246.8 million rupees annually being spent on food in the province. One contemporary observer computed an average annual consumption of fine rice alone to be worth 35.04 million rupees<sup>27</sup>.

An estimate such as this will be open to a wide range of criticisms and all of them may perhaps be valid. This estimate does not take into account the regional variations in consumption, it assumes a fixed pattern of consumption for all social strata, it does not discuss consumption expenditures over time and fails to relate these expenditures to the price situation--- these are perhaps just a few objections which can reasonably be anticipated. The estimate I have made is *purely tentative* and is an attempt to indicate the money involved in the annual demand for agricultural produce. The other reason is to draw attention to the fact that such large amounts could not have emerged from consumption in towns alone. There is evidence to believe that town demand and the demand in overland markets did not account for more than 20 percent of the gross trade in agricultural produce<sup>28</sup>. The remaining

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<sup>24</sup>(...continued)

G.11, tables 38, 39; hereafter, "Ronggoppur"]. These figures pertain to predominantly rural populations, patterns of consumption in cities would differ as large numbers of wealthy people residing there would perhaps tend to spend more on different types of food.

<sup>25</sup> Reverend W. Tennant, *Indian Recreations*, (written in 1797), vol. 2, London 1806, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 434, George Smith to Henry Dundas, 28 February 1791, p. 647.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 468.

<sup>28</sup> Datta, 1986:388. There is also some indication of a reduction in the long-distance movement of grain from Bengal in the eighteenth century and its replacement by short-distance movements [Ibid.; also S. Arasaratnam, 1988].

portion, excluding between 6 and 8 percent for seed stock<sup>29</sup>, was consumed within Bengal's *countryside* and this aspect has not been given adequate weightage in the reconstruction of Bengal's economic history, and it is to this that I now turn.

The idea that most of Bengal was an interlinked chain of "innumerable villages" interspersed with a few towns was originally put forward by James Rennell in 1765<sup>30</sup>. The same theme recurs when W. Hamilton, writing in 1828, says: "villages from 100 to 500 inhabitants are astonishingly numerous, and in some parts form a continued chain of many miles along the bank of rivers"<sup>31</sup>. The absence of area statistics for this period does not allow us to estimate the number of villages in all areas of the province, or account for their spatial distribution. Table 1 outlines the data available.

Table 1

Estimates of Villages in Different Districts of Bengal

Year	District	Number of Villages
ca.1760	Burdwan	8000
ca.1765	Birbhum	6000
1771	Birbhum	4500 <sup>a</sup>
1772	Nadia	3499
1774	Hijli	579
1778	Mahisadal	438
1778	24 Parganas	3124
1778	Hughli	579

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<sup>29</sup> H.T.Colebrooke, *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce Of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1794 (reprinted 1884), p. 15 [hereafter, *Remarks*]; Buchanan, "Ronggoppur", IOL, Ms. Eur G.11, table 40.

<sup>30</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 765, p. 146.

<sup>31</sup> cited in Marshall, 1987: 151.

1778	Purnea	5350
1778	Rajshahi	16132
1788	Midnapur	4303
1788	Jalsor	1891
1788	Baldakhal	1200

\*: Indicates the severity of the famine of 1769/70 in this district

Source: John Johnstone, *Letter to the Proprietors of the East India Stock*, London, 1776, p.6; R.K.Gupta, 1977:47; Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 29076, f.11; Add.Ms., 29087, f.58, 97, 119; Add.Ms., 29088, ff.116-22, f.108; IOR, BRP, P/70/49, 15 December 1788; Ibid., P/70/48, 7 November 1788.

Obviously clusters of villages would tend to be greater in areas closer to important commercial and administrative centres<sup>32</sup>, but the spatial distribution of these villages does suggest a continuous, and often densely packed, chain constituting most parts of Bengal's countryside. Area figures given by Rennell<sup>33</sup> and the data available in table 1 suggest the following spatial distribution of villages in our period:

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<sup>32</sup> Pargana Muragatcha in the 24-Parganas had 436 villages in 1790 because of its closer proximity to Calcutta. This was the highest concentration of villages in this district when compared to other parganas proportionately distanced from the city [IOR, BRP, P/71/22, 1 March 1790]. The parganas of Midnapur and Cossijura had 839 and 829 villages respectively (in 1788) thereby contributing nearly 34 percent of the total villages in that district [Ibid, P/70/49, 16 December 1788].

<sup>33</sup> James Rennell, *Bengal Atlas: Containing Maps of the Theatre of War and Commerce on that Side of Hindostan*, London 1781, p.53.

District	Village: square mile ratio
Burdwan	1: 0.64
Birbhum	1: 1.16
Midnapur	1: 1.14
Purnea	1: 0.96
Rajshahi	1: 0.80
Nadia	1: 0.91
Jessore	1: 1.71

Population data for these villages are practically non-existent, though Johnstone's estimate does give us an average of 250 persons per village in Burdwan in the 1760s<sup>34</sup>. Relatively large villages could have more than 250 households around Murshidabad<sup>35</sup>, whereas in a relatively less developed district like Commilla "the average is less than 10 persons [per] village"<sup>36</sup>. The crucial fact about these villages is that they jointly accounted for about 70 percent of the agricultural product available for internal consumption. A part of that consumption would appear to have been natural, i. e., producers exchanged their home-grown items without the direct mediation of money; but the extent of such transactions were small, nor could they have been significant enough to determine the content of exchange relationships in the economy. An interesting example of this phenomenon is provided by the rice of the spring harvest (*aus dhan*). It was generally recognized that this rice was intrinsically of an inferior quality than the one produced in winter (*aman*) and was consumed by the "lowest and poorer classes"<sup>37</sup>. Rice of this kind would presumably have featured prominently in a system of natural

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<sup>34</sup> *Letter to the Proprietors*, op.cit., p.6.

<sup>35</sup> WBSA, PCR, Murshidabad, vol.8, 15 February 1776.

<sup>36</sup> IOR, BRP P/70/48, 7 November 1788.

<sup>37</sup> WBSA, Grain, vol.1, 17 October 1794.

exchange; yet the grain merchants made it a point to purchase the *aus* crop from the cultivators *before* they could dispose of their surpluses independently in local markets<sup>38</sup>. Since the so-called "coarsest grains" were sown in the *aus* season, the intervention of the merchants here perhaps indicates the widespread dissemination of an exchange economy in the province.

Another reason for the growing importance of rural demand was the gradually shifting patterns of agricultural production and the emergence in Bengal of, what Bayly has termed "unstable areas" of production in his study of northern India<sup>39</sup>. Marshall has located "a shift in the balance between western and eastern Bengal" brought about by long-term changes in Bengal's river systems during the course of the eighteenth century<sup>40</sup>. Contemporary evidence seems to confirm such findings. Burdwan's agriculture and manufactures had declined considerably by the mid-1770s<sup>41</sup>. By 1775, Purnea was an "impoverished country" with a "lowered value of lands and their produce"<sup>42</sup>, and it was also recognized that the economic advantages had shifted to "the countries in the lower part of Bengal"<sup>43</sup>. The contemporary awareness of this shift also becomes apparent, for instance from Robert Kyd's survey of the western bank of the Hughli river in 1791 during which he noticed that the "granaries" of Bengal were now located in areas like Dhaka and Bakarganj in the east, when previously these had

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 29 October 1794.

<sup>39</sup> Bayly, 1983: 84-88.

<sup>40</sup> Marshall, 1987: .3-4.

<sup>41</sup> IOR, BRC P/49/41, 1 October 1773; also *ibid.*, P/49/50, 27 January 1775.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, P/49/54, 18 July 1775.

<sup>43</sup> IOR, FR, Murshidabad, G/27/4, 20 December 1771.

been situated in Burdwan, Hughli and Rajshahi<sup>44</sup>. By the mid-1770s the decline of Rajshahi's agriculture, population and commerce was "too evident a melancholy truth", even to the officials of the East India Company<sup>45</sup>.

Essentially these areas had made a transition from surplus into relatively deficit positions through a combination of natural disasters (floods and famines) and state taxation. It is no secret that the burden of the Company's taxes, and the rigours of its revenue experiments between 1760 and 1771 were borne primarily by western Bengal<sup>46</sup>. The overall results of these factors seem to have been increasingly observable shortages of labour, capital and money in these deficit areas, which in turn made them depend heavily on the imports of essential items from relatively surplus areas of the province.

The rising demand for food was matched by attempts to extend cultivation on new lands, especially in the eastern fringes of deltaic Bengal<sup>47</sup>.

The district of Bakarganj was opened up for cultivation in the early years of the century by a combination of state (*Nizamat*) initiative and the enterprise of small-scale landed proprietors (*talluqdars*)<sup>48</sup>; by the 1750s it had become one of the prime

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<sup>44</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, f. 44 a.

<sup>45</sup> IOR, BRC P/49/52, 5 February 1775.

<sup>46</sup> Verelst Manuscripts, IOL, Mss. Eur. F. 218/15, ff. 30, 31.

<sup>47</sup> In fact possibly the largest single wave of reclamation in the history of the province commenced from the end of the eighteenth century and culminated by the middle of the nineteenth century. Estuarine marshes in the active delta (e.g. in Bakarganj and Jessore) were opened up and settled, and by the end of the nineteenth century there was very little cultivable land in Bengal which was not fully occupied [compare, Beveridge, 1876: 203; Westland, 1871: 135; B.B. Chaudhuri, 1976].

<sup>48</sup> See BRP, IOR P/71/26, 4 June 1790; Beveridge, 1876.

exporters of rice to Calcutta<sup>49</sup>. Bakarganj's rice seems to have become crucial to the existence of another important centre of production, the town of Qasimbazaar, in western Bengal. In 1754 when the Nawab threatened to blockade the imports of rice by the English from Bakarganj, there was an immediate panic "of the misery the place must be reduced to" by any such act<sup>50</sup>. Even during the famine of 1769-70, Calcutta continued to receive a major portion of its supplies from this district<sup>51</sup>, and by 1791 it was recognized as one of the major granaries of Bengal<sup>52</sup>.

The integration of Bakarganj's rice growing economy with the regional demand in foodgrains led to three social developments. First, there was the formation of a hierarchy of trading interests ranging from the wholesaler (*aratadar* and *goldar*) and middleman (*paikar*) to the peddler-cum-agent (*faria*) in the villages<sup>53</sup>. Second, there appears to have been a rapid reclamation of the Padma estuary under the combined initiative of the *talluqdar* and the merchant. Third, we see a proliferation in tenurial and sub-tenurial arrangements, engineered by the cultivators themselves in order to keep the best spots of land under their own control and to attract labour on a permanent basis on lands which were initially often inhospitable<sup>54</sup>.

The pull of regional demand, especially that of Calcutta, saw the opening of another vast area in eastern

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<sup>49</sup> Marshall, 1987:22.

<sup>50</sup> Coast & Bay, IOR E/4/5, 4 January 1754.

<sup>51</sup> IOR, BPC P/1/44, 14 November 1769.

<sup>52</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, f. 44 a.

<sup>53</sup> Datta, 1986: 385, 397.

<sup>54</sup> The second and third social developments are described in Beveridge, 1876: 194-203.



Bengal-- the Sundarbans<sup>55</sup>, or the estuarine forests in Jessore, where, according to an estimate made in 1784 there were more than 600, 000 *bighas* (200,000 acres) of reclaimable land available<sup>56</sup>. Reclamation was undertaken by the *zamindars* who granted waste lands on concessional rates of revenue to settlers (*abadkar*)<sup>57</sup>. These settlers provided the initial investment and when the clearing had proceeded to a certain point, they settled the "ryotts upon the land thus partially cleared to bring it into cultivation"<sup>58</sup>. The other social group closely involved in the process of agricultural expansion were the grain merchants interested in controlling the rice trade from here to the cities of western Bengal and to Dhaka. This strategy was realized by a system of advance loans to the cultivators. The annual practice of these merchants "to advance to the poorer class of ryotts a sufficient quantity of grain to sow their lands, to be repaid in kind at the time of cutting their crops" had become the most widely prevalent method of agricultural production by the late 1780s<sup>59</sup>. The process of reclamation begun in this period was slowly coming to a close by the 1870s when the great forests of estuarine Jessore had almost entirely been converted into immense rice tracts<sup>60</sup>.

Francis Buchanan's descriptions of reclamation in Chittagong and Tippera circa 1798 suggest a rapid expansion of land under cultivation in areas like Lakshmipur and Noakhali. In fact the newness of reclamation in some of

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<sup>55</sup> See Westland, 1871: 226 for the connection between supply of rice to Calcutta and extension of cultivation in the Jessore Sundarbans.

<sup>56</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/63, 6 August 1784.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., P/51/9, 9 August 1787.

<sup>58</sup> Westland, 1871: 228.

<sup>59</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/20, 7 May 1788.

<sup>60</sup> Westland, 1871: 135.

these areas was apparent to Buchanan "by the stumps of the trees still remaining in the rice grounds"<sup>61</sup>.

Evidence regarding the spread of cultivable land suggest that the following districts underwent a rapid reclamation in our period:

In Western Bengal

Midnapur

24-Parganas

In Eastern Bengal

Bakarganj

Jessore

Sylhet

Chittagong

Markets and the State in eighteenth century Bengal

The importance of an orderly system of markets in the overall movement of local trade and the connection between trade and revenue was recognized both by the *Nizamat* and the East India Company. Murshid Quli Khan, the first really powerful *Nazim* of the province, seems to have made it his avowed policy to intervene in the movement of grain from the countryside to the towns only during periods of food shortages in an attempt to restrict monopolies by the grain merchants<sup>62</sup>. Apart from the tax motive, such intervention by the regional state was also guided by the immediate expedient of keeping supply lines open to towns under threat of scarcity. Price regulations and control by the *Nizamat* was an exercise in redirecting the movement of the agricultural surplus from the countryside to the towns during years of scanty harvests. In normal agricultural

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<sup>61</sup> Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 19286, f.15-16.

<sup>62</sup> Francis Gladwin, *A Narrative of the Transactions in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1788, p.122; also cf. BPC, IOR P/1/10, 15 January 1733 and *ibid.*, P/1/26, 19 November 1757.

years, the relative balance between supply and demand was allowed to regulate both the amount of staples flowing into the towns and the prices at which these were sold. The *nirkh* (price rates) in the *bazaars* of the early eighteenth century signified "the prices which the vendors *generally regulated on their own*", which were then confirmed by the official seal of the market supervisor ( *daroga-i-bazaar*)<sup>63</sup>.

The *Nizamat's* attitude towards the market under normal economic circumstances was guided by its own perception of mercantile activity and by the social milieu in which these markets were formed and functioned. The state's attitude to mercantile activity is perhaps evident from Alivardi Khan's assertion that the "merchants are the Kingdom's benefactors; their imports and exports are an advantage to all men. ..." <sup>64</sup>. It was this attitude, held by the *Nazims* in general which probably resulted in their farming the trade of "the several articles which constitute the internal commerce of Bengal and Bihar" to the local merchants: "such commerce seems to have consisted *principally*, if not *exclusively*, in commodities of the *natural produce*, or *manufactures*, of these provinces" wrote Henry Vansittart (in 1762) about the state of internal commerce under the *Nizamat*<sup>65</sup>. Such an arrangement seems to have been mutually acceptable to both parties involved in the venture. For the state it was certainly considered financially viable<sup>66</sup>; so was it for the merchants.

Thus in Bishnupur, the betel-leaf (*paan*) merchants had in the past the "exclusive privilege vested in them of

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<sup>63</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/44, 11 July 1788; emphasis added.

<sup>64</sup> Alivardi Khan to Barwell, 9 January 1749, IOR Home Misc., vol. 804, p. 61.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., vol. 92, 15 December 1762, p. 32; emphasis Vansittart's.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

vending all the betel produced in Bishnupur or brought from other districts [thereby becoming] purchasers at their own prices & vendors at what rates they please"<sup>67</sup>. The betel-leaf trade at Dhaka was similarly situated. The farmer of this trade (*paan mahal*) purchased zones of exclusive trade from the state and "no other person could bring any betel leaf from the moffusul and if anyone attempted it, the farmer attached the leaf, *as his property*, by virtue of his engagements with the government"<sup>68</sup>. These exclusive rights of trade were not limited to a high-value article like betel. The *Nizamat* era seems to have seen the formation of such rights in practically all types of commercial activity, even at the lowest rung of the market (the *hat*) at the village level. At Nadia, petty retailers of rice and paddy paid special monetary gifts (*salami*) to the *zamindar* for the exclusive privilege of selling rice at the *hat*; there were *salamis* paid for acquiring similar rights over retailing salt, over gathering shells for making lime (*chunam*), for weighing and measuring commodities being brought for sale at the *hats* (*kayali*) and even for the sale of firewood to cremate the dead in the village<sup>69</sup>.

The other factor which influenced the state's attitude towards markets was the social origins of such places in Bengal. What mattered here were not merely the larger markets in towns like Dhaka and Murshidabad, but the whole range of small and intermediate markets (*hats* and *bazaars*) which were linked in a pervasive commercial network. Some of these smaller centres of redistribution were created partly by the family members of the *Nazims* and by their officials. In greater part however, they were the products of *zamindari* initiative. Most of the wholesale forward markets (*ganjs*) in the revenue paying circle (*chakla*) of

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<sup>67</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/23, 25 March 1790.

<sup>68</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/50, 24 October 1789; emphasis added.

<sup>69</sup> BR Misc., IOR P/89/36, 13 May 1790.

Murshidabad were established by members of the provincial ruling elites over the years (these markets were said to be between 17 and 300 years old in 1793)<sup>70</sup>; but the *bazaars* and *hats* "appertain to ancient zemindarries and the tolls are the rent right of the zemindars"<sup>71</sup>. In Nadia, these markets were created and held by "zemindars and tallokdars [*talluqdars*] from whom it does not appear that any security was ever required to be taken"<sup>72</sup>. In Jessore, the *hats* were sub-divided into various shares by the *zamindars* as "there are many partners each [having] a share in the haut [*hat*] and paying their revenues in distinct tahoods [contracts] or engagements..."<sup>73</sup>.

*Bazaars* and *hats* were established with the prior permission of the state, which was easily granted, but the actual operation of these markets were left in the hands of the founding landholder, the "government of the soubahs [the *Nizamat* contented themselves with imposing general regulations for the prevention of undue exactions and *occasionally* interfered to modify or abolish particular imposts as they occurred or were discovered..."<sup>74</sup>. Even holders of revenue-free, charitable, land-grants (*la-kharaj*) were given governmental sanction to establish "gunges, bazaars and hats" and were "authorized to exercise the privilege of collecting duties thereon"<sup>75</sup>. It is therefore not surprising that the *zamindars* persisted in claiming from the Company "an equal right in rents arising from gunges and bazaars" as late as 1790<sup>76</sup>, when the entire political

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<sup>70</sup> BRC, IOR P/53/12, 15 May 1793.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., P/51/23, 3 September 1788.

<sup>72</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/32, 38 August 1787.

<sup>73</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/14, 7 July 1790.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., P/51/13, 11 June 1790.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., P/52/9, 9 April 1790.

equation had changed in the province.

The *Nizamat* implicitly recognized the importance of mercantile activity and of an articulated network of markets to the regional economy. An illustrative example of how commercial considerations shaped the attitudes of the potentates of the state can be given from the case of liquor manufacturing and retailing in the environs of Murshidabad. Here 38 out of 80 shops selling high grade liquor, 28 out of 53 shops retailing toddy, and 62 out of the 139 shops dealing in opium in 1790 were owned by Nawab Mubarak-ud-daulah and his family<sup>77</sup>. Given the fact that the "vend of liquor is extensive in towns"<sup>78</sup>, ownership of retailing outlets provided supplementary income for the town elites, thereby showing the extent to which the upper crust had become integrated with the commercial network. Further down the social scale we find merchants, even at the *hat* level, willing to pay a tax (even a bribe) in exchange of acquiring exclusive privileges of trading even in basic staples like rice. This fact perhaps indicates quite forcefully the extent to which markets had become crucial to the existence of the local economies as well as the frequency with which commercial transactions had spread during the early eighteenth century.

But there were still major barriers in the way of a regionally integrated market in the first-half of the century. The fact that merchants, and even petty vendors at the *hat* level, were able to carve out petty domains of privileged trade, and that *zamindars* and other landed proprietors were the prime agents for the establishment of these markets jointly militated against the development of an unfettered system of markets in the province. The reason for this *zamindar/byapari* combination, expressing, and at the same time retarding, the formation of a regionally integrated market, was largely due to the state's internal

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<sup>77</sup> BR.Misc., IOR P/89/36, 29 October 1790.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 7 May 1790.

need to balance the two social strata in order to ensure its own stability<sup>79</sup> in the midst of a prosperous economic situation. However, the overall outcome of such an arrangement seems to have been a combination of two developments: (a) a proliferation of *zamindari* outposts (*chowkis*) to collect tolls at various rates dictated by the financial predilections of an individual *zamindar*<sup>80</sup>; and (b) continuous conflicts between merchants and *zamindars*, and between *zamindars* and other landed proprietors, over the rate of tolls, over market jurisdictions and the movement of commodities. These conflicts often assumed violent proportions and could even disrupt marketing networks in the short run<sup>81</sup>.

The post-1757 era saw the state and markets interacting along significantly restructured lines because of the changing political and commercial situations in Bengal. The political-economy which determined such restructuring was described in 1789 in the following words:

To keep in motion the great machine of the Company's commerce, it is absolutely necessary that the provision of Cargoes for the due return of ships be ensured. Hence the origin of previously investing Funds at the Aurungs [manufactories]; hence also the necessity of being secured in due realization of goods for which money is advanced... . The accession of the Company to the Government of the Country [the *Diwani*] did not change these [earlier] principles and usages, tho' the immense increase of their Funds and of the wealth of their Servants, all to be *center'd finally in*

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<sup>79</sup> See Calkins, 1970:799-806; and Marshall, 1987:63-64 for the political necessities facing the *Nizamat*.

<sup>80</sup> For example in the crucial trade route between Calcutta and Murshidabad there were 18 *chowkis* [cf. Mohsin, 1973: 104].

<sup>81</sup> Datta, 1986:395.

*Europe and to be conveyed thither only in goods exceedingly enlarged the demands for the Market of Bengal*<sup>82</sup>

These considerations necessitated a closer control over internal markets than what had prevailed under the previous regime. After 1757, state intervention assumed the apparently contradictory forms of rigorous control in the marketing of some commodities and a relatively striking non-interference in the movement of others. The pressures of a world market meant that commodities like textiles and opium (and later indigo) were to be rigorously controlled at all levels *including* production. After 1772 salt was added to the list of official monopolies, not so much for its overseas value as for its being lucrative in the internal trade of the province<sup>83</sup>.

For trade in other commodities, especially that in agricultural produce, the Company's attitude was one of ensuring "fair trade"<sup>84</sup>, which entailed the dissolution of the restraints not only of the type inherited from the *Nizamat*, but also of the type fostered by the Company's own officials in the form of the Society of Trade. The latter task was tackled by the administrative exercise of prohibiting the private trade of its officials from 1771 onwards, and by attempting to place severe restrictions on profiteering and hoarding of grain during times of scarcity<sup>85</sup>. The former job occupied a major portion of its official business, especially after the disastrous famine of 1769-70. With regard to the internal barriers to the

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<sup>82</sup> "Report of Commercial Occurrences, 6 August 1789, IOR, Home Misc., vol. 393, pp. 279-80; emphasis added.

<sup>83</sup> Serajuddin, 1978; Barui, 1985; Marshall, 1987: 111-12.

<sup>84</sup> Minute of Warren Hastings, 9 March 1773, IOR, Home Misc., vol. 217, p. 29.

<sup>85</sup> Marshall, 1976: 243; Datta, 1986: 380.



movement of trade, the Company's attitude was that *chowkis* were inimical to fair trade and to the honest trader as these, and the tolls levied there, meant that merchants were "too frequently and . . .unnecessarily subjected to the exercise of authority" other than the Company's and that too many transit duties tended to push up prices beyond any reasonably accepted standards. The logical step from this type of reasoning was that the *chowkis* had to be abolished and duties had to be streamlined so that prices "of manufactures and of the necessities of life" could be brought down<sup>86</sup>. Implicit also in the Company's structure of reasoning was the need to display its newly acquired political power. "A market is a place", wrote Vansittart in 1778, "where *authority must be exercised* to regulate the weights and scales, to preserve order and to afford protection to the persons who frequent it..."<sup>87</sup>.

The first major step in the realization of the Company's aims came in 1773 when:

- (1) all duties levied upon grain "in its transportation from the country" were abolished;
- (2) duties on trade in agricultural produce were henceforth to be collected "only at the capital towns whither it is brought for consumption", and the management of such duties was to be under five customs houses to be established and stationed at Calcutta, Hughli, Murshidabad, Dhaka and Patna;
- (3) "all road duties [*rahdari*] whether by land or water exacted antecedent" to the regulations of 1773 were to be made null and void;
- (4) "all the inferior types of chokies [*chowkis*]" over all types of trade routes were to be

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp.28-29; also cf. BRC, IOR P/49/38, p.836, 1032.

<sup>87</sup> Minute of Henry Vansittart, 16 December 1778, CCR, IOR P/67/72; emphasis added.

dismantled in a phased manner; and

(5) the right of the local merchant to be "at liberty to carry his merchandize where ever he thinks proper for sale" was to be ensured<sup>88</sup>.

The thrust of these regulations seems to have had an immediate impact, at least on the movement of trade to the towns. For example, the general levies made on *zamindari* piers (*ghat chowkis*) between Murshidabad and Calcutta declined from a previous (in 1756) range of 4 rupees to 1 rupee to a high of 3 rupees and a low of 0.12 rupee in 1774<sup>89</sup>.

The other bottleneck in the free movement of goods, that of the control exercised by the *zamindars* and *talluqdars* over markets, was not so easily overcome. The main reason for this was the continuing resistance of these people to any state interference in what they considered to be their hereditary and ancient rights<sup>90</sup>. The problems in this regard were many, thereby showing the complexities involved in state intervention in a sphere it considered as a pure economic institution but which was in reality a distinct form of agrarian property. Markets were established by "zemindars, talookdars and every denomination of rent free holders"<sup>91</sup> with a view to their income, but like all things privately owned, these were often sold to a host of buyers which created major problems in the way of

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<sup>88</sup> "Regulations for the Future Establishments and Regulation of Duties of the Country Government, March 1773", IOR, Home Misc., vol. 217, pp. 44-49; also BRC, IOR P/49/38, 23 March 1773.

<sup>89</sup> Compare K.K. Datta, 1936: 159-60 and WBSA, PCR Murshidabad, vol. 2, 20 June 1774.

<sup>90</sup> For the opposition of the *zamindars* in Burdwan BRC, IOR P/52/9, 9 April 1790; in Jessore Ibid., P/52/14, 24 June 1790; and in Nadia, BRP, IOR P/70/32, 28 August 1787.

<sup>91</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/12, 28 May 1790.

the state's plans for outright dispossession. The buyers, according to John Shore, were "proprietors" and dispossessing such a person would amount to taking "away his whole property from him; and this in Bengal would excite clamour and discontent in the proprietors"<sup>92</sup>. The apparent explosiveness of the situation forced the Company to drag its feet till about 1790 when the first major steps were taken to bring the landed proprietors to heel. The option of outright dispossession was hotly debated in the Board of Revenue, but was finally shelved. In order to circumvent the "clamour and discontent", the state took a close look at the pattern of ownership and the structure of taxes and duties (*sair jihat*) in these market places, established a major difference between the two and decided to continue one and abolish another.

What the Board of Revenue did was to make a separation between rents collected in these markets and taxes collected on trade. Rents were designated as "any collections made...as a consideration for the use of grounds, shops and other buildings belonging to landholder", whereas taxes were deemed to be those levied as a "duty on commodities" and on transit of goods. A landholder's right to collect rent was considered his "private right" and therefore not to be interfered with, but the right to tax was construed as the "exclusive right of government"<sup>93</sup>. Thus on July 20, 1790, landholders were prohibited from all involvement in the collection of *sair jihat* in lieu of a fixed compensation, and henceforth "no proprietor of land [would] be admitted to any participation thereof, or be entitled to make any claims on that count"<sup>94</sup>.

The Company's policies, those of monopolistic control

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<sup>92</sup> John Shore in *FR* 2, p.493.

<sup>93</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/13, 11 June 1790.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, P/53/1, p.475.

of trade in high-value goods, ensuring unrestricted trade in agricultural produce and the separation of rent and tax had a major impact on the state of Bengal's internal market. These policies led to that crucial bit of state intervention necessary for the final crystallization of an integrated market for agricultural produce in Bengal, thereby bringing to a culmination the processes already set in motion under the *Nizamat*<sup>95</sup>. One major outcome of this kind of interference was a proliferation in market places all over Bengal. By the 1770s Calcutta was definitely undergoing an increase in "various kinds of hauts and bazaars"<sup>96</sup>, which, in some quarters (like the police) was seen as a "great public nuisance. ..by the general exposure of provisions of all kinds in the highways and the innumerable shops and sheds erected thereon"<sup>97</sup>. In the 1780s the 24-Parganas, situated south of Calcutta, was seeing an "extension of hauts and bazars...by which old hauts are destroyed and new ones constructed"<sup>98</sup> and by 1792 this district had 144 markets of which *hats* numbered 100<sup>99</sup>. In 1790 Jessore was served by a chain of 225 *hats*<sup>100</sup>, and Burdwan had 17 *ganjs* and 345 *hats* in the same year<sup>101</sup>. The following figures<sup>102</sup> give some indication of the increase in the numbers of market places in some districts of Bengal during our period:

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<sup>95</sup> Marshall, 1987: 13-14 also locates the formation of an integrated market in Bengal during this period.

<sup>96</sup> CCR, IOR P/67/72, 16 December 1778.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., P/67/62, 13 May 1776.

<sup>98</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/27, 8 May 1787.

<sup>99</sup> BR, Misc., IOR, P/89/37, 27 June 1792.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., P/89/36, 5 July 1790.

<sup>101</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/16, 9 July 1790.

<sup>102</sup> Taylor, 1840: 203; BR Misc., IOR P/89/37, 27 July 1791; Martin, 1976, vol. 5: Appendix M; Martin, 1976, vol. 3: Appendix O.

<u>District</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>No.of Markets</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>No.of markets</u>
Dhaka	ca.1765	536	1791	650
Rangpur	ca.1770	321	ca.1807	591
Dinajpur	ca.1770	206	ca.1807	635

### Agricultural prices and the economy

Figure 1 (p. 41) shows the movement of food prices in Calcutta between 1754 and 1800 and indicates an apparent stability of rice prices when compared to the rapid oscillation in the prices of other agricultural commodities. But an inference that rice prices were stable or they rose at a gentle pace during our period would be dubious for three reasons. First, figure 1 relates rice prices to the prices of the most costly items of food. Therefore it is bound to reflect a certain degree of stability by comparison. Second, it does not consider the impact of bad harvests on the price situation. This fact (discussed in chapter 2) is vital to our comprehension of the state of agricultural production. Third, the graph does not indicate the price-differentials between town and country and this aspect has to be established if we are to understand the logic behind the local trade in food-grains.

Figure 2 (p. 42) shows the movement of rice prices in Calcutta between 1754 and 1800. What we get from this is a picture of a fairly secular price upswing interspersed with numerous crests and troughs during this period. The price crests reflect unfavourable agricultural seasons. The question is: do the prices in Calcutta indicate the state of prices in the rest of the province? Figures 3 and 4 (pp. 43 and 44) represent polynomial and linear trends of coarse rice and sugar prices between 1700 and 1800, and both

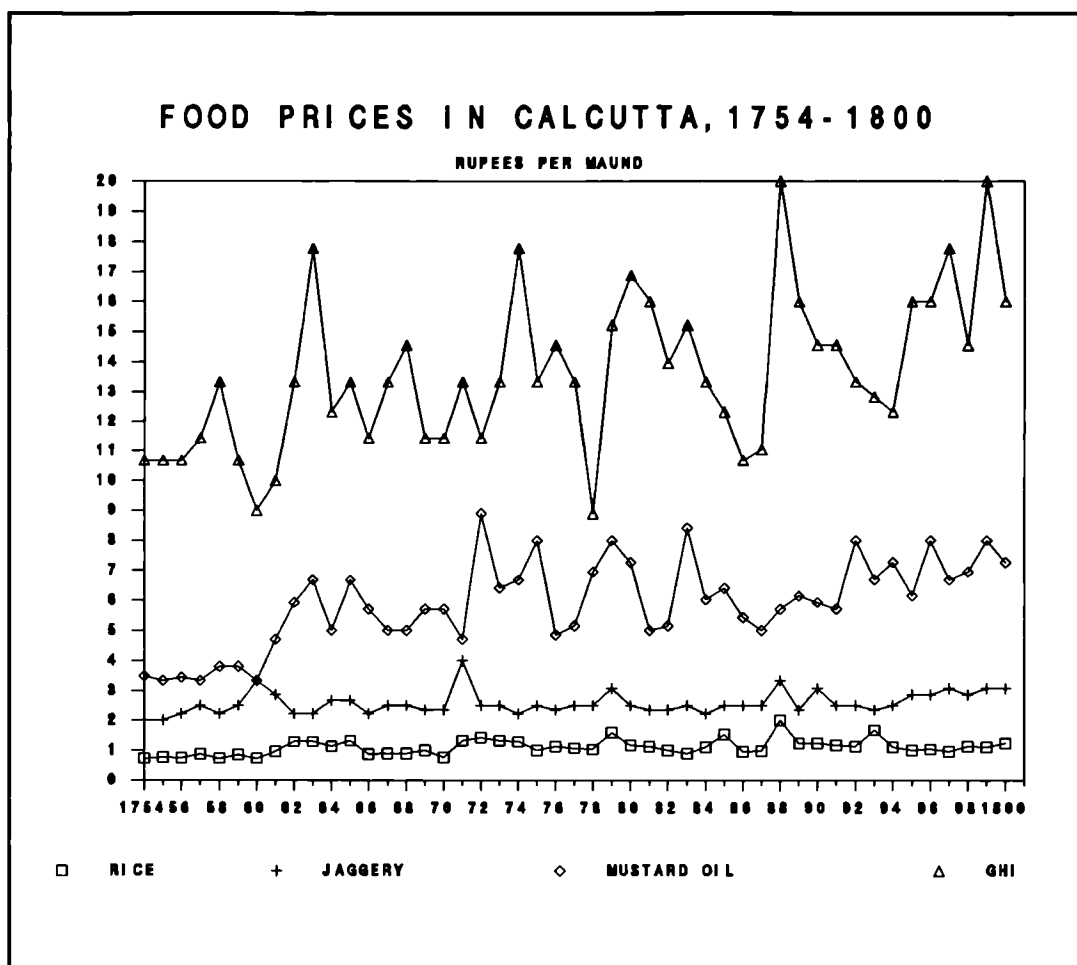


FIGURE 1

Source: W.B.Bayly, 1816: 560-61.

reveal an unmistakably upward linear trend. What these two figures also reveal is the almost uniform price escalation in two of the most diverse types of food-items: ordinary rice (obviously the central component of a poor person's diet) and sugar (coveted by the poor but consumed by the rich).

Finally, Figure 5 (p. 45) compares the prices of winter (*aman*)rice in Calcutta with those prevailing in four districts situated in different regions of the province for years when comparable price figures are available. One of these districts, Midnapur, is situated south-west of

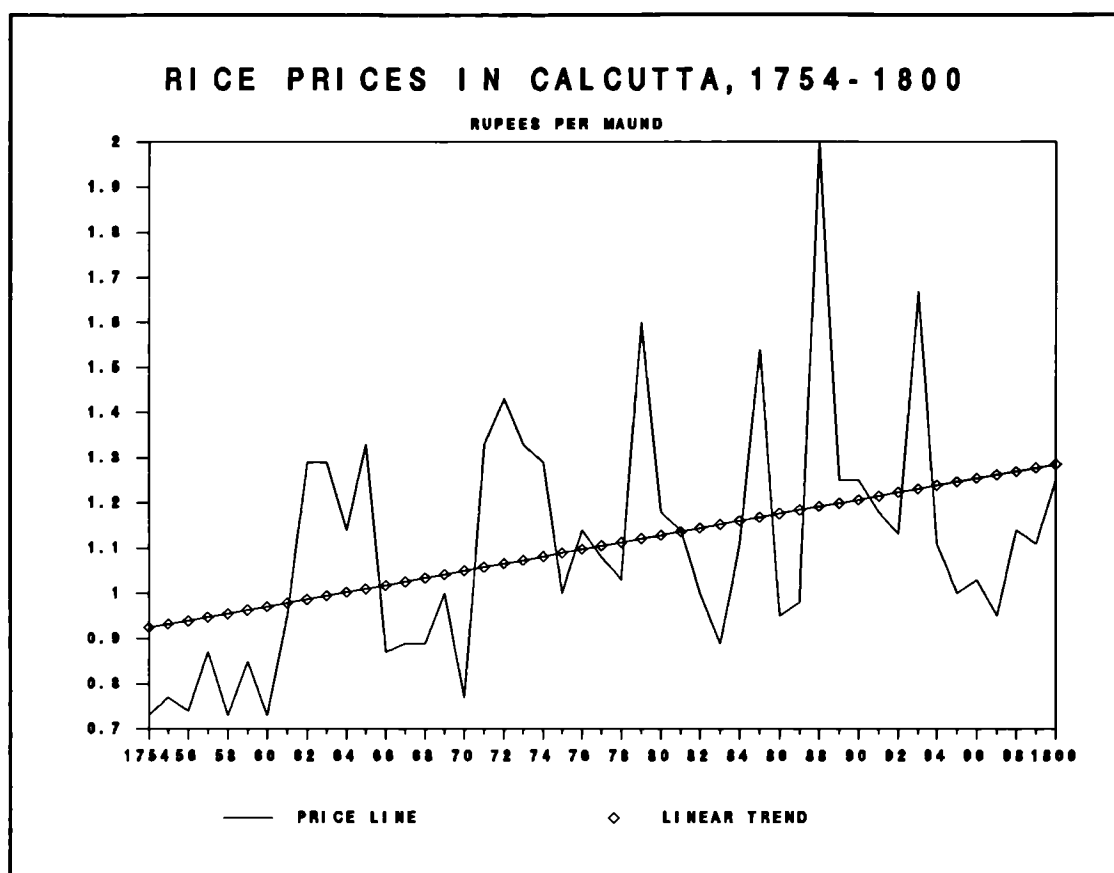


FIGURE 2

Source: As in Figure 1.

Calcutta, Chittagong is to the south-east, Purnea lies north-west and Dinajpur to the north of that city

Figure 5 reveals three symptoms about the behaviour of agricultural prices. First, it shows a that the rise in prices was differentially distributed within a generally upward trend. Second, prices in each of these areas show sharp fluctuations caused, in all likelihood, by the nature of the current harvest. Third, there was a fairly continuous rise in the *rural* prices of rice and this feature is of great significance in understanding the

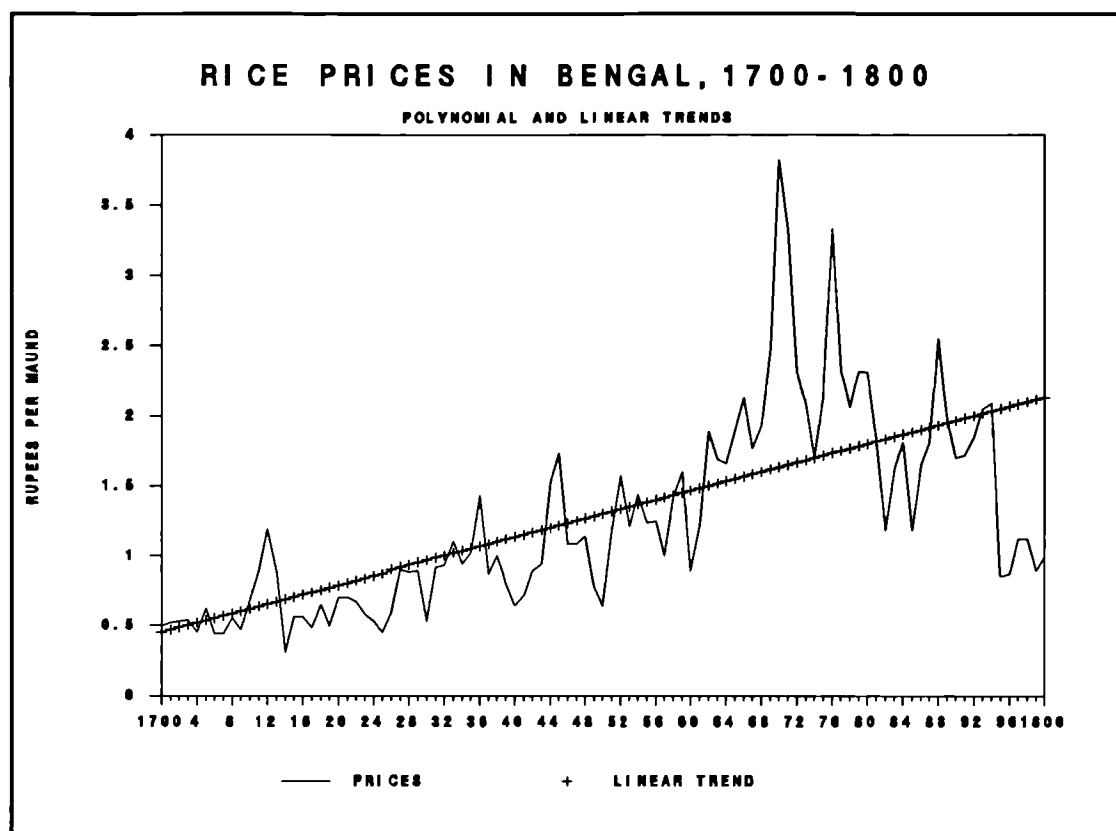


FIGURE 3

Source: A.S.M.Akhtar Hussain, "A Quantitative Study of Price Movements in Bengal During Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries", Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, London University, 1977 [hereafter, "A Quantitative Study"], pp. 277-78.

developments in the provincial economy<sup>103</sup>. It is perhaps for the first time in Bengal's history that we can speak of an economy integrated by provincially uniform price-trends.

The preceding discussion perhaps establishes two aspects crucial to the behaviour of prices, harvests and people's lives in our period. First, harvests and

<sup>103</sup> The phenomenal price rise in 1788 was due to a famine in that year; but what is notable is the rapidity of the increase of rural prices in 1787 (a year of a massive flood) and the amazing price rise in Calcutta in 1788. I shall return to the significance of famine and dearth prices in chapter 2.



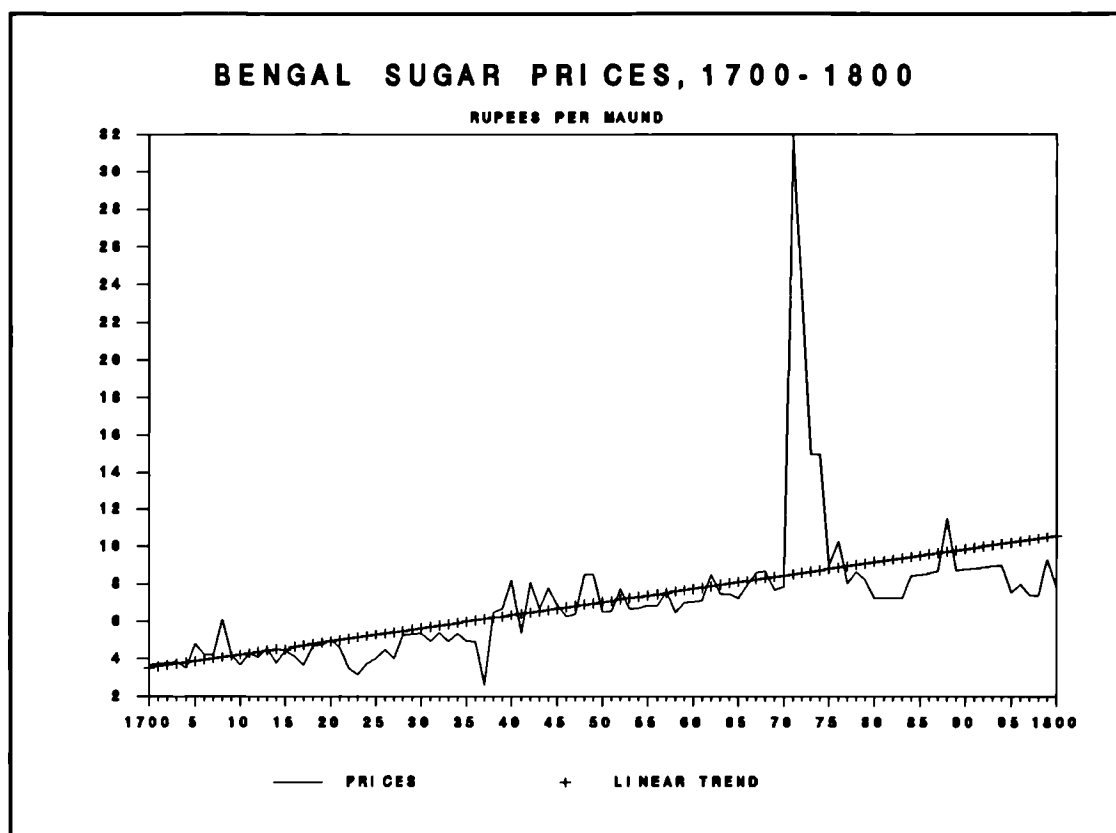


FIGURE 4

Source: Hussain, "A Quantitative Study", pp. 277-78.

agricultural prices were related in a regionally integrated network. Second, the economy was price sensitive since a rise in the price in some districts would immediately raise the prices in far-flung areas. The second aspect of the price situation can be seen in sharper relief during times of dearth and famine. This I discuss in Chapter 2.

That there was an integrated regional market for grain in Bengal, and that demand of food in different parts of the province had a palpable impact on the state of prices as well as upon the intra-regional flow of food has been

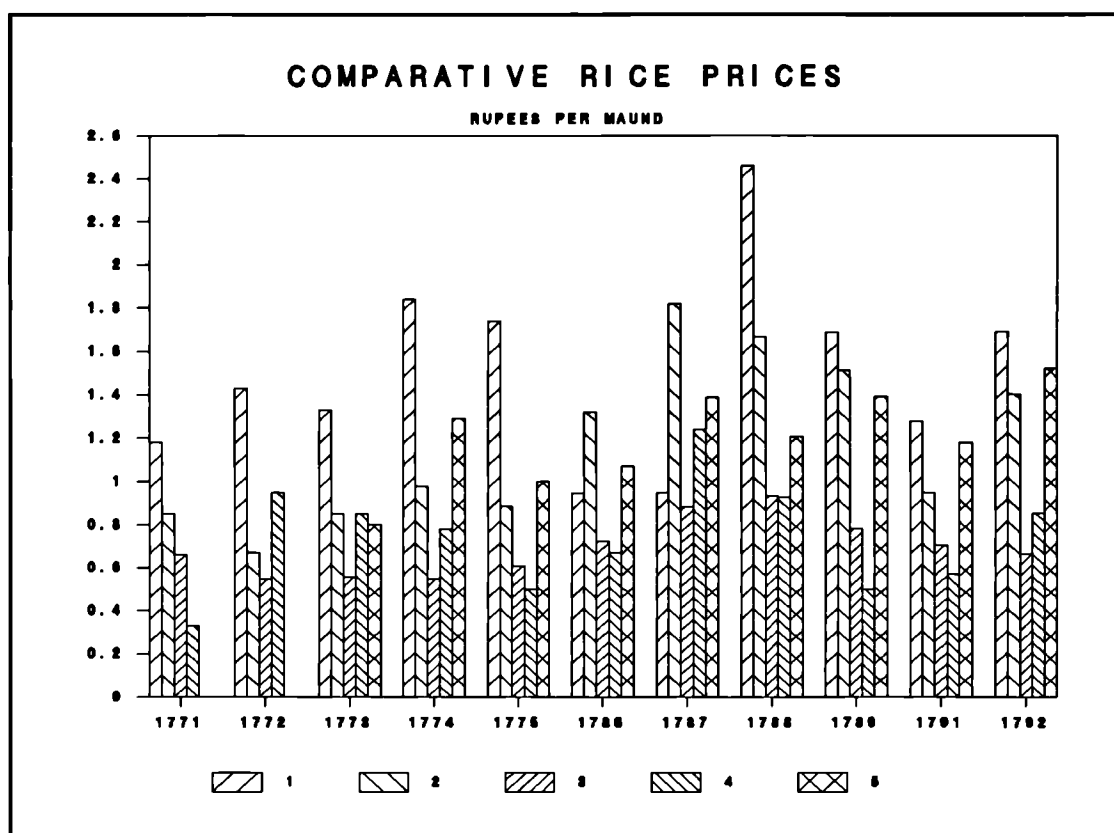


FIGURE 5

Legend: 1: Calcutta; 2: Midnapur; 3: Chittagong; 4: Purnea; 5: Dinaipur.

Source: For Calcutta, W.B. Bayly, 1816: 560-61; for Midnapur, Chittagong, Purnea and Dinaipur, BRC, IOR P/49/42 to P/52/40; WBSA, Grain, vol.1, 17 October 1794 and WBSA, PCR, Dinaipur, vol.4 and 6, Appendix to Proceedings.

brought into focus<sup>104</sup>. It is also important to bear in mind that artisans, townspeople, boatmen and even the rural poor had to purchase their food from a specialized community of grain merchants who dominated over the entire gamut of this

<sup>104</sup> Also see Marshall, 1987: 13-14; D.H. Curly, "Rulers and Merchants in Late Eighteenth-century Bengal", unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Chicago University, 1980, p.49 for similar points.

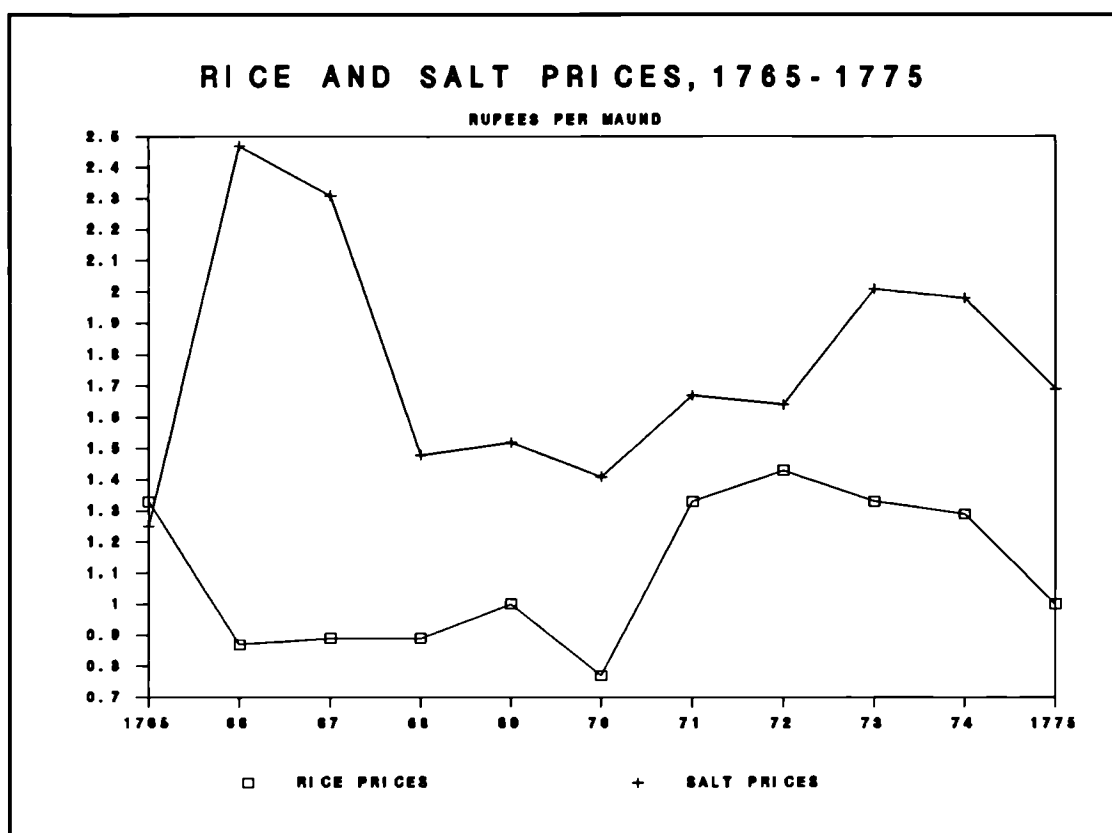


FIGURE 6

Source: for rice, W.B.Bayly, 1816:560; for salt, BRC, IOR P/49/64, 24 September 1776.

trade<sup>105</sup>. Finally, agricultural prices exerted a grave influence on the prices of other commodities and on the living standards of both the agricultural and non-agricultural population, a point which requires further elucidation.

An inter-sectoral interdependency of price whereby the oscillation in one sector influenced prices in another seems to have been a well-established feature of Bengal's agrarian economy. This fact is clearly evident from Figure 6 (p. 46) which compares the prices of rice and salt in

<sup>105</sup> See Datta, 1986 and Chapter 6 below.

Calcutta between 1765 and 1775<sup>106</sup>.

Naturally, therefore, price movements influenced incomes in the different sectors of production. A rise in the price of rice or paddy meant that "the ryotts are obliged to sell the produce of their lands dearer than formerly" while the manufacturer "paying more than formerly for the materials & for the necessaries of life are unable to subsist without increasing the price of their goods"<sup>107</sup>. H.T.Colebrooke (writing circa 1793) observed that the price of grain had the greatest influence on the prices of other commodities in the market<sup>108</sup>. The high price of cotton in 1789 was being blamed "upon the famine [1788] which increased the value of corn"<sup>109</sup>. "Should a degree of scarcity raise the price of grain above the average rate, it falls heavily on the manufacturer"<sup>110</sup>, and an "exorbitant encrease [sic] on the rate of the necessaries of life renders the ordinary allowances for labour insufficient"<sup>111</sup> are statements which clearly indicate the economic influence exerted by the state of agricultural prices on the conditions of practically every harvest-dependent social strata in Bengal. The people who were most affected by the state of agricultural prices were presumably the poorer-peasants having insufficient lands at their disposal, the rural and urban labourers and those artisans who depended exclusively on the market for their subsistence. A recent study of the weavers in the employment of the East India Company shows that a rise in

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<sup>106</sup> The steep rise in salt prices between 1766 and 1767 was due to the monopoly practiced by the short-lived Society of Trade. Once this monopoly was abolished, salt prices reverted to their market levels.

<sup>107</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 206, p. 149.

<sup>108</sup> *Remarks*, p. 67.

<sup>109</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/9, 15 May 1789.

<sup>110</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/22, 15 August 1788.

<sup>111</sup> IOR Home Misc., vol. 393, 6 November 1788, p. 121.

food prices was fraught with severe consequences since these artisans had to pay more to buy food for their subsistence, but were themselves unable to raise the prices of their products<sup>112</sup>.

High food prices over a long-term could theoretically prove beneficial to the peasants and to the agricultural sector but only under three conditions (a) the rise in food prices was not due to a shortfall in the harvest, (b) the real burden of state taxation remained below the rise in price and (c) there was no corresponding increase in the prices of non-agricultural products. The situation in Bengal was apparently contrary on all three counts. First, a sharp increases in prices were almost invariably signs of a shrunken produce caused by failures of harvest (see chapter 2)<sup>113</sup>. Second, state taxation under the regime of the East India Company was essentially regressive, and there was very little effort made by the state to reduce the burden of taxation, or provide relief, even during famine-stricken conditions<sup>114</sup>. Third, that the prices of

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<sup>112</sup> Hamida Hossain, 1988: 9-11..

<sup>113</sup> On the contrary, low agricultural prices were synonymous with abundant harvests which "invariably hurt the ryott as in such an event they want purchasers for their grain" (BRC, IOR P/50/68, 20 November 1783). The peasant's plight during abundant harvests was described by Colebrooke in the following words:

When the crops of corn are very abundant, it is not only cheap, but wants a ready market. As the payments of rents are regulated by the season of the harvest, the revenue is due and must be paid, whether there be or not be a vent for the produce... . Thus the eagerness of the vendors reduces the price [*Remarks*, p. 67].

<sup>114</sup> The classic case of regressive state taxation in the midst of an acute crisis of subsistence is the financial behaviour of the Company during the famine of 1769/70. In a situation when harvests fell short by as much as 50 percent, the Company actually collected a revenue of 14.74 million rupees in 1769/70 and 13.82 million rupees in 1770/71, both sums being higher than the collections  
(continued...)

non-agricultural products had risen prodigiously during the course of the late eighteenth century appears an undeniable fact. For instance the market price of silk-cocoons apparently increased by more than 50 percent within the space of one year between 1770 and 1771<sup>115</sup>, while there was a short-run slump in the prices of paddy and other "inferior variety of grains" in many districts between 1771 and 1773<sup>116</sup>. Whatever relief this may have provided for the artisans was clearly to be short-lived, as 1773/74 and 1775 were once again years of dearth caused by bad harvests. As rice prices rose, the prices of raw materials and of the finished-good tended to rise proportionately. Thus by 1789:

The unusual rise in the prices of the two principal articles so necessary to the weavers, Rice and Cotton, has created an encrease [sic] in the price

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<sup>114</sup>(...continued)

actually made (13.59 million rupees) in 1765/66, the year when it was given the *Diwani* of the province [*PP, Fourth Report*, 1783, pp.99-101]. Even Warren Hastings was forced to admit that the pitch of the Company's revenue demand was "violently kept up to its former standard" during the famine (vide.G.W.Forrest, 1910: 265]. In fact the collections in the worst affected districts of western Bengal (where the epicentre of the famine was actually located) was 34.72 percent higher in 1770/71 than in 1769/70 (cf., FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/1, 4 April 1771 for figures).

The tax burden during the famine of 1786/87 is not documented in the sources. Nevertheless some figures provided by N.K.Sinha [1968: 105] show that the the Company actually collected more revenue during the dearths of 1773/74, 1775, 1779 and 1783 than what was collected in the years before these occurrences.

<sup>115</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol.769, 22 August 1771, p.361.

<sup>116</sup> See WBSA, CCRM, vol.3, 25 January 1771; WBSA, Circuit at Purnea, 2 February to 9 February 1771, p.8; BRC, IOR P/49/40, 26 June 1773; *ibid.*, P/49/46, 31 May 1774.

of cloths at the Markets beyond what was ever known, and introduced a practice of reducing the number of threads of the warp, which has debased the cloths in their texture<sup>117</sup>.

Another aspect, vital to the structure of local trade in food-grains, was the nature of the price differential prevailing between town and country. Table 1.1 sets the widely scattered evidence regarding this in a somewhat comprehensible fashion.

Table 1.1

Price differentials between town and country  
(rupees per maund)

Year	Place	Price in towns	Country price
1773	Chittagong	0.62	0.55
1774	"	0.61	0.54
1775	"	0.62	0.56
1774	Burdwan	1.43	0.80
1775	Murshidabad	1.31	0.52
1788	Dinajpur	1.17	1.06
1789	Dhaka	0.68	0.53
1791	Birbhum	1.54	1.06
1792	"	1.40	1.05
1794	Dhaka	0.80	0.57
1791	Calcutta	1.38	1.14
1792	"	1.82	1.25
1794	"	0.94	0.44

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<sup>117</sup> "Report Of Commercial Occurrences", 6 August 1789, IOR, Home Misc., vol. 393, pp. 254-55.

Source for Table 1.1: BRC, IOR P/49/44, 11 December 1773, 10 January 1774; P/49/47, 22 August 1774; P/49/50, 28 January 1775; P/51/21, 4 June 1788; P/51/50, 28 October 1789; P/52/37, 23 November 1791; P/52/42, 9 March 1792; P/52/44, 4 May 1792; P/52/45, 1 June 1792; Datta, 1986:389.

Figure 7 (p. 52), which shows the state of rice prices in Calcutta, Burdwan and Birbhum between 1784 and 1813, perhaps amply demonstrates the existence of significant price-differentials between town and country in our period.

Thus Bengal prices show an integrated economy undergoing a fairly noticeable rise in the *rural* prices of food. We have also seen that prices tended to oscillate from year to year, and this fact was important in shaping merchant-peasant linkages: a point which will be discussed at length subsequently. Finally, the nature of price differentials between town and country, coupled with the rise in country prices had significant socio-economic implications. As will be discussed subsequently (chapter 6), they provided a new direction to local trade in agricultural produce, not just in terms of movement of food, but also with regard to the social relationships which emerged in the countryside in this period.

### State taxation and the economy

Reconstructing the revenue history of post-*Diwani* Bengal is a difficult task, the main reason for which is that revenue is mainly linked to the problem of the "drain" of wealth. The preoccupation of Nationalist historiography



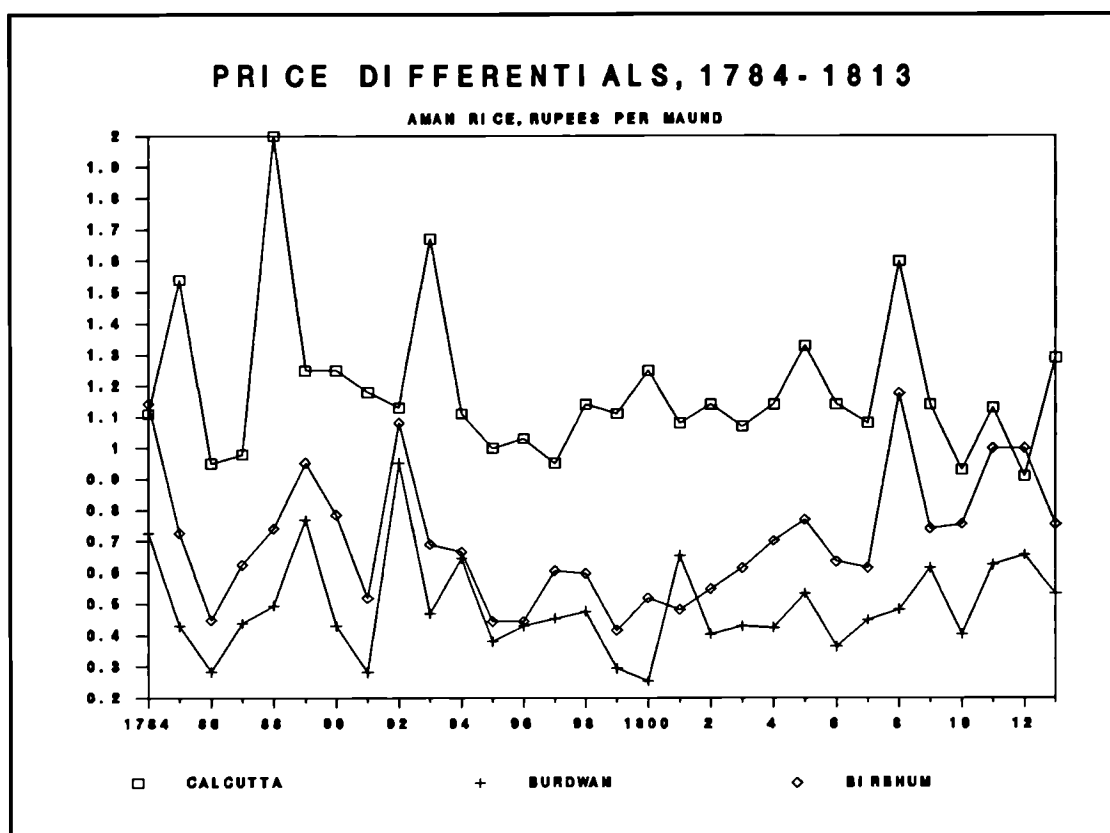


FIGURE 7

Source: W.B.Bayly, 1816: 560-64.

with this connection, often reiterated by Marxist writings<sup>118</sup>, has resulted in a major gap in our comprehension of Bengal's economy in the late eighteenth century.

Figure 8 (p. 53) represents the data of assessed revenue (*jama*) of Bengal between 1700 and 1790. What this graph shows is a steady rise in the revenue assessment of the province after 1765. The fact that the figure includes Bihar's *jama* after 1765 does not reduce the importance of the trend because it was Bengal's *jama* which was, at least in this period, the crucial indicator of the Company's

<sup>118</sup> See for instance, Irfan Habib, 1983-85: 73-77.

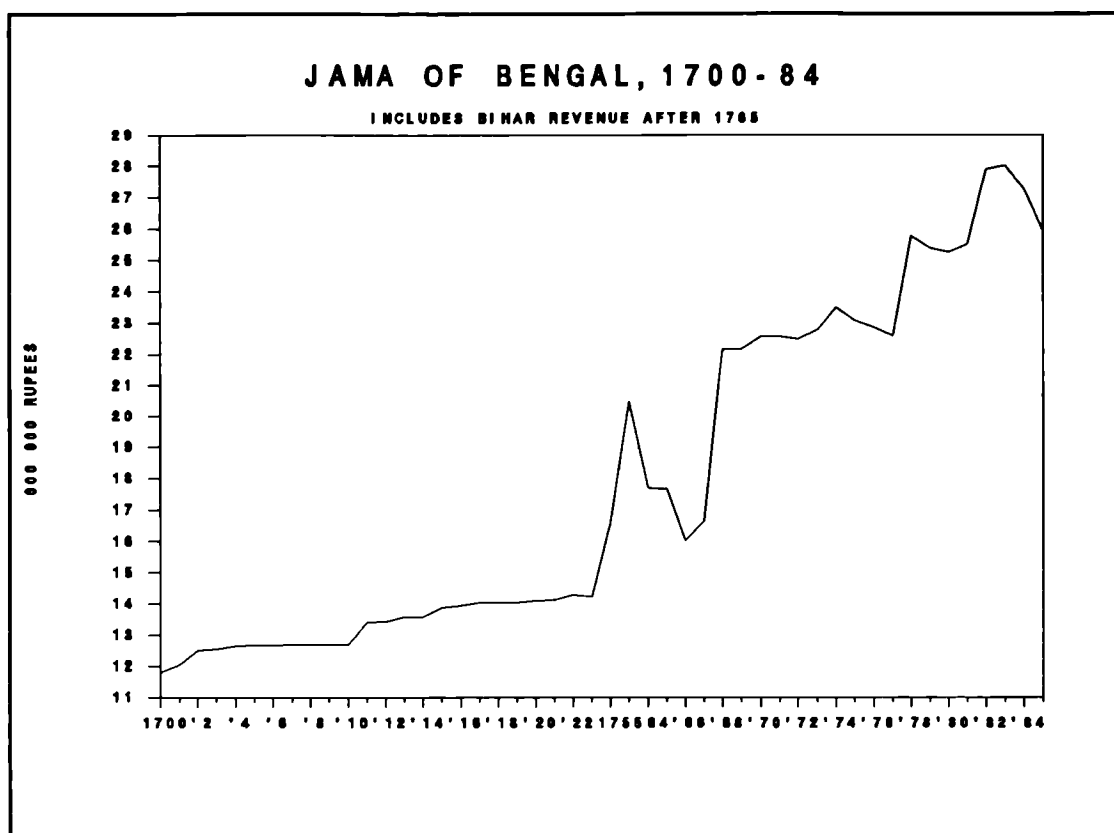


FIGURE 8

Source: BRC, IOR P/51/18, 2 April 1788, Appendix no. 7; IOR, Home Misc., vol.122, p.753; Verelst Papers, IOL, Mss.Eur.F.218/15, ff.30-31; Sinha, 1968: 105; Brit. Mus., Add.Ms., 29205, f.258.

revenue<sup>119</sup>. It is in the context of this rise that Figure 9 (p. 54), showing *hasil* figures between 1761 and 1784 becomes significant. What strikes in figure 9 is the increasing parity between the pitch of assessment and the amount actually collected by the Company after its acquisition of the *Diwani* despite raising the levels of both to a degree largely unprecedented in the history of

<sup>119</sup> For instance, the *jama* of 1790 was 25.926 million rupees. Of this Bengal's share was 21.743 million rupees (83.86 %) while Bihar's share was 4.182 million rupees (16.14 %) [Brit. Mus., Add.Ms., 29205, f.258].

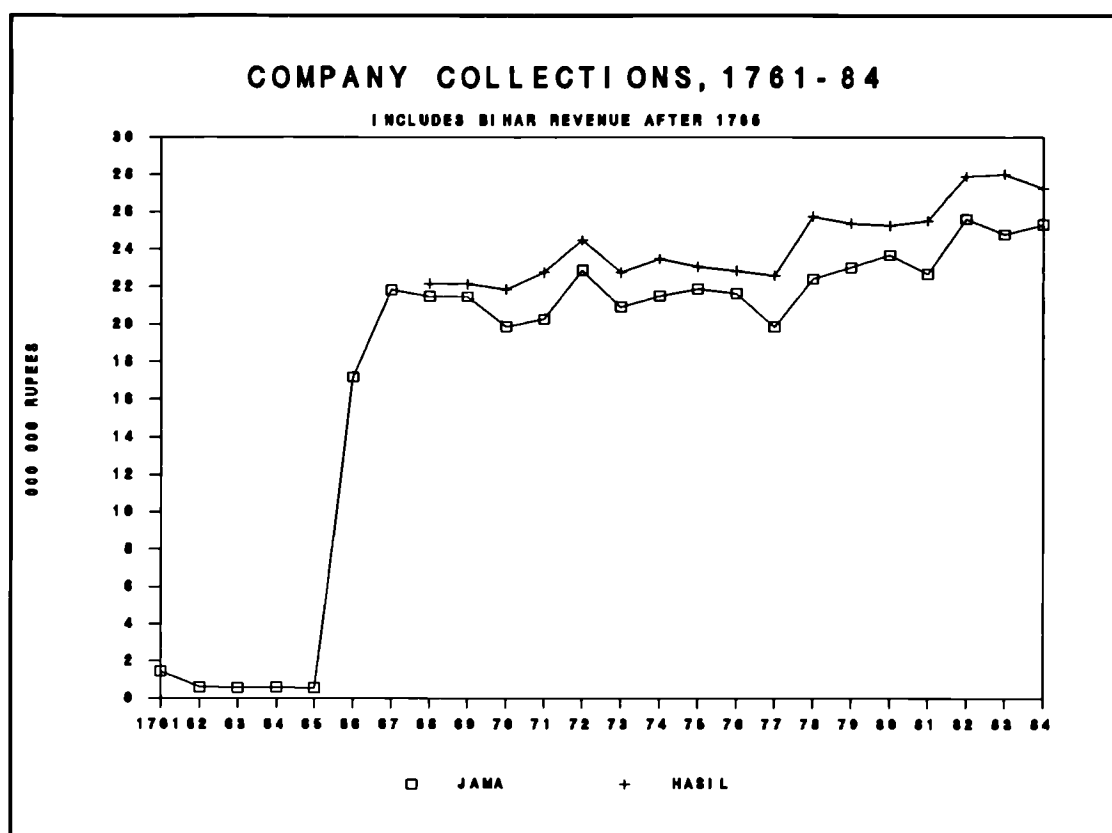


FIGURE 9

Source: As cited in Figure 8.

the province<sup>120</sup>, thereby justifying (from the Company's

<sup>120</sup> Unfortunately, the amounts actually collected by the Nawabs of Bengal are not known. Alivardi Khan was credited with collecting nearly one and a half crores (15,000,000) from his assessment of 16.62 million rupees [compare, Verelst Manuscripts, IOL, Mss. Eur. F.218/15, f.30 and *ibid.*, F.218/9, f.23]. Mir Qasim raised the *jama* to nearly 20.47 million rupees [IOR, Home Misc., vol.382, p.291], but could actually collect a lot less. The only available figures of his collections are from the districts of Dinajpur and Rangpur:

	<i>Jama</i>	<i>Hasil</i>
Dinajpur	29,10,885	18,22,156
Rangpur	11,29,324	6,68,692

[SCC, IOR P/A/9, 13 September 1769; Sinha, 1968:29].

perspective) Warren Hastings's statement that "Bengal wants only a little respite [sic] to retrieve its own affairs"<sup>121</sup>.

How do we explain this striking increase in state appropriation within such a short time of the political transition? A partial explanation may lie in the rise in agricultural prices throughout the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the extent to which the *jama* of post-*Diwani* Bengal reflected an inflation of price is debatable. It certainly appeared so to Philip Francis who ascribed the rise in prices in the late eighteenth century to the "insupportable taxation which racks the landholder... since the acceptance of the Dewanny"<sup>122</sup>, thus indicating that revenue demand rose faster than actual prices.

Some answers perhaps exist in the inherent *inefficiency* of the previous regime's (the *Nizamat's*) appropriating mechanism, and in the political necessities of that state to strike a workable balance of power with the *zamindars* who were crucial for its very survival. The revenue administration of the Company would therefore seem to have been qualitatively different than its predecessor's<sup>123</sup>. This is borne out by the differences in the revenue administration of the two regimes. Under the *Nizamat*, the abiding principle of revenue administration was to adhere to the *assul jama bandobust* (original assessment) established by Akbar. Subsequent increases were made from time to time by *abwab* and *mathot* (additional imposts) which were then added to this *assul* to provide new *jama* figures<sup>124</sup>. The Company's administration was different because, not only did it retain the previous policy of

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<sup>121</sup> G.W.Forrest (ed.), 1910: 21.

<sup>122</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/56, Minute dated 21 February 1777.

<sup>123</sup> For a contrary view, see P.J.Marshall, 1987: 140-42.

<sup>124</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 122, p. 771-73; IOL, Mss. Eur. F. 218/15, ff. 30-31.

using *abwab* and *mathot* to revise assessments, it introduced the previously unheard policy of taxing districts in relation to their actual productive resources. The detailed investigation of the "Aumeen Commission" in 1778 bear adequate testimony of the Company's desire to get at the productive capacities of different districts. The papers of that Commission conclusively show that after 1765, the Company's revenue increments were based on four sources:

*Talaash Beshee*: Increases made by searching for secreted land

*Beroopher Beshee*: Increases made from identifying lands sown with high quality crops

*Comar Utpan Beshee*: Increases made from grain producing lands

*Abwab and Mathot*: Additional taxes and imposts levied on the *assul*<sup>125</sup>

The ease with which Bengal was subjugated and the Company's commercial necessities ("territorial revenue" was used to fund "investments" and pay for the upkeep of its military establishment after 1765) enabled the post-1765 state to establish a tighter control over its revenue than what had been possible before. Loopholes remained. Charity grants continued to pose tremendous problems for the administrators throughout this period (see chapter 3), but the central thrust of the Company's policies made it a qualitatively different regime than its predecessor.

These considerations are vital for understanding the economic role of the Company and to contextualize Bengal's revenue history in this period. I have already drawn attention to the state's intervention in the market as a device to free it of its major internal restrictions imposed by *zamindari* control. The available evidence

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<sup>125</sup> See Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 28086 to 29088, esp. 29088 for figures.

indicates that the steps taken to this effect were substantially forceful and met with very little *effective* opposition from the local landed proprietors. A proliferation in market-places was its most immediate outcome. The increase in their numbers, or their establishment in previously deficient areas enabled the peasantry to relate more easily to wider commercial networks and facilitated the creation of a pervasive gamut of mercantile functions (discussed in chapter 6). It therefore appears that a greater degree of appropriation was accompanied by increasing the facilities for circulation of commodities.

The other important aspect of revenue was the manner of its assessment and collection. Irfan Habib has shown the existence of a fairly extensive system of collecting revenue in cash in pre-colonial India; but revenue-in-cash was *one* form in which the surplus was appropriated. Myriad forms of non-monetized appropriation (like *batai*, *kankut*, *ghalla-bakshi*) existed along with the Mughal *zabt*, and the state allowed the cultivator the option of paying revenue in kind even in the *zabti* regions<sup>126</sup>. There was undoubtedly a fairly extensive cash-nexus in Medieval India, but a multitude of non-cash forms of taxation perhaps indicate that such a nexus was perhaps *unevenly developed* in the major portion of the empire. For instance Bengal was not a *zabt* area during Mughal rule<sup>127</sup>.

The distinctive feature of revenue in the eighteenth century is that there was a continuous tendency to appropriate revenue *only* in cash. While various types of

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<sup>126</sup> Habib: 1963.

<sup>127</sup> See the information on Mughal and Nizamat land-revenue assessment in Bengal in BRC, IOR P/49/70, 4 April 1777. For information on how these worked in different districts, BRP, IOR P/70/16, 7 June 1786 for Birbhum; Ibid., P/70/37, 8 May 1787 for Rangpur and BRC, IOR P/51/22, 23 July 1788 for Jessore.

crop-sharing persisted in Bihar<sup>128</sup>, the Nawabs of Bengal collected their revenue in cash, which meant that the portion of the crop earmarked as revenue was sold in the *bazaar* by the producers at prevailing prices. This is borne out by a number of later inquiries made by the Company on the revenue administration during the reign of the "soubahs" (Nawabs) of Bengal. According to the Board of Revenue's estimate (made in 1788), the total silver currency in stock in the first half of the century amounted to more than 12 crore (120,000,000) rupees<sup>129</sup>, of which 60,000,000 rupees seems to have been the money in annual circulation (each sicca rupee "can not be issued and received more than once in two years")<sup>130</sup>. Comparing this estimate with *Jama* figures available suggest that the gross assessment levied by Murshid Quli Khan (in 1722) of 14.11 million rupees<sup>131</sup> amounted to 23.52 percent of the circulating medium, whereas Alivardi Khan's *jama* (in 1756) of 18.684 million rupees<sup>132</sup> represented 31.14 percent of the currency in circulation. Thus the fact that there was hard currency available facilitated the collection of revenue in cash. It is therefore no accident that the silver *sicca* had become the "general currency" of Bengal, which was "13 oz. 15 devts or 13 devts better than the English standard", and whose purity was maintained by "recoinage after every three years"; it is also not surprising that this *sicca* had "become the standard of weight throughout Bengal; the seer is composed of so many

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<sup>128</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/40, 13 January 1792.

<sup>129</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/40, 25 April 1788.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 18 April 1788.

<sup>131</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/18, 2 April 1788.

<sup>132</sup> IOR Home Misc., vol. 122, 22 January 1776, pp. 771-73. Perhaps this was the reason why Alivardi Khan could collect his assessments in full.

siccas, and the maund at forty seers"<sup>133</sup>.

Thus the Company's rule occurred at a time when the collection of revenue in cash had already become a "general" phenomenon and took this process a step further by adding to the pitch of the revenue demand and by ensuring parity with the *hasil*. This meant that nearly 40 percent of Bengal's agricultural output taken as revenue<sup>134</sup> was annually converted into cash. The chief indicator of the connection between revenue and cash is the influence of agricultural prices (discussed above) on the province's peasant economy. The state also persistently refused all suggestions to revert to revenue in kind during periods of price slumps in order to reduce the pressure on the peasants<sup>135</sup>, which implies a major departure from one of the abiding principles of Mughal land-revenue administration. The obvious rationale of such a refusal was the state's financial necessity. Thus by 1769, even sharecroppers in an extensive *zamindari* of Burdwan were being made to sell the crop and then pay the *zamindar* in *cash*, a process which seems to have intensified in subsequent years<sup>136</sup>.

The connection between revenue and commercialized agricultural production can be seen from the connection between revenue, crops and agricultural seasons. Peasants in Bengal paid revenue in three installments (*kists*) coinciding with the three harvest seasons: *aman* (winter or *kharif*), *aus* (spring or *rabi*) and *boro* (an intermediate harvest). In general *aman* rice was commercially the most

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<sup>133</sup> John Shore's Minute on The Coinage of Bengal, 28 October 1789, in BRC, P/51/50, 28 October 1789.

<sup>134</sup> John Shore's Minute of 18 June 1789, in *FR* 2, p.192.

<sup>135</sup> See the suggestion of George Bogle to collect revenue in grain during the massive price slump of 1771 and 1772 in D.C.Ganguly, 1958: 90.

<sup>136</sup> Compare, SCC, IOR P/A/9, 16 August 1769 and BRP IOR P/72/4, 6 July 1792.



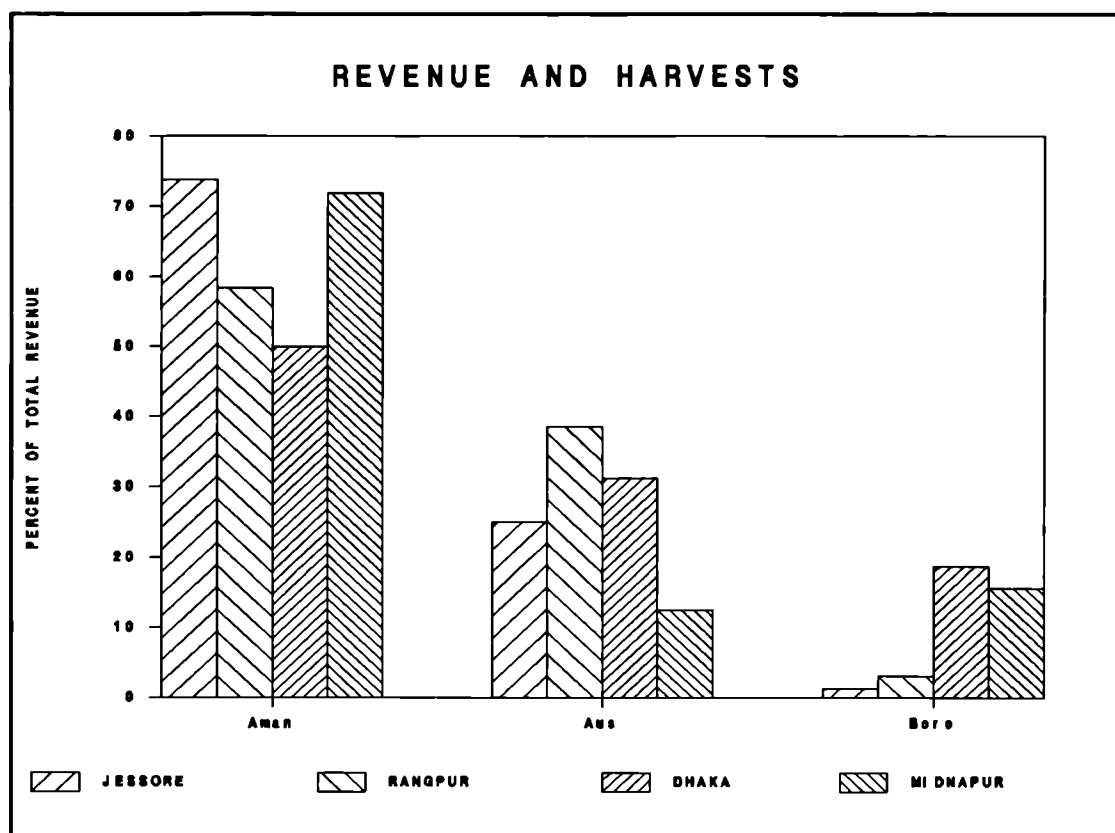


FIGURE 10

Source: Jessore, BRC, IOR P/51/13, part 2, 10 February 1788; Rangpur, BRP, IOR P/70/27, 8 May 1787; Dhaka, Ibid., P/70/38, 4 February 1788; Midnapur, Ibid., P/70/37, 11 February 1787.

valuable, being produced mainly for sale. "The Khureef (*kharif*) crop is undoubtedly more productive than that of Rubee" were the words used by the Board of Revenue to describe the value of the former harvest in Bengal<sup>137</sup>. It was this harvest which determined the major amount of revenue collected because most of the important "cash" crops like cotton, mulberry, tobacco and sugarcane were either sown or harvested during this principal agricultural

<sup>137</sup> BRP, P/70/27, 8 May 1787.

season<sup>138</sup>. *Aus* rice was relatively inferior and was essentially consumed by the "lowest and poorer classes of people". *Boro* produced the coarsest quality rice and was grown in "low marshy ground after the waters have subsided"<sup>139</sup>. The proportion which each bore to revenue in different districts is outlined in Figure 10 (p. 60) which is based on evidence available from the districts of Dhaka, Rangpur, Jessore and Midnapur.

The connection between revenue and commercial agriculture (as revealed by figure 10) is perhaps self-explanatory.

Taking stock of the discussion so far, it is perhaps reasonable to say that the economic context of the late eighteenth century becomes explicable by looking at it from the perspective of rapid commercialization engendered by a conjuncture of demand, prices and state action. I had remarked at the outset of this discussion that one of the important elements in the late eighteenth century conjuncture was the fortuitous cluster of dearth and famine years beginning with the famine of 1769/70. I now turn to analyze the causes and socio-economic significance of these events.

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<sup>138</sup> See Chapter 5 below for details.

<sup>139</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol. 5, 30 April 1771; BRP, IOR P/70/38, 4 February 1788; WBSA Grain, vol. 1, 17 October 1794.

## Chapter 2

### **Dearth and Famine in Late Eighteenth Century Bengal**

Practically everyone in late eighteenth century Bengal was keenly aware of the dangers to society from famines and dearth. The state (i.e. the East India Company's state) was a veritable barometer, registering each and every little change in the economic atmosphere caused by scarcities or bad harvests as they jeopardized the collection of revenue. The local landed-proprietors (*zamindars* and *talluqdars*) saw such situations as an inevitable evil which they had to endure even though these meant falling incomes and desertion by their peasants. For the producers, the peasants and the artisans, famine and dearth was a bitter fact of life. For them such events were nothing short of God's own scourge on earth: not only were their enterprises severely shaken; not only did they die in large numbers; they were also left with the crippling burdens of making good the losses suffered by the state and by their landed-superiors. For the producers, dearth and famines were more than just "bad" agricultural years. Such years were sheer crises of survival. The following sections attempt to analyze the causation, symptoms and nature of such crises in late eighteenth century Bengal.

### Dearth and famine:some conceptual formulations

Recent studies by Sen, Alamgir and Arnold<sup>1</sup> have made major contributions towards the theoretical conceptualization of famines. Alamgir's study is particularly important as he provides a rigorous definition of a famine as:

A general state of prolonged foodgrain intake deficiency per capita giving rise to a number of accompanying sub-states (symptoms) involving individuals and the community that ultimately lead, directly or indirectly, to excess deaths in a region or a country as a whole<sup>2</sup>

Alamgir also establishes a typology of famine according to its severity and its social ramifications. He provides us with three types of famine "(1) general famine, (2) local/regional famine and (3) class famine". In a general famine, the entire nation is affected "although the time sequence may differ between regions and between different classes of people"; "in a local/regional famine only a part of the country, but all groups of people within it, is affected"; and in a class famine "the burden of foodgrain deficiency per capita and excess mortality falls primarily on the weaker sections of the population with little staying power". The impact of famines on a country, region or class (or classes) depends upon "their initial condition and the particular causal sequences leading to

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<sup>1</sup> A.Sen,1982; M.Alamgir,1980; D.Arnold,1988. Also see Lance Brennan,Les Heathcote and Anton Lucas,1984 for an excellent comparative analysis of famines in nineteenth century Asia.

<sup>2</sup> Alamgir,1980: 7

the famine"<sup>3</sup>.

Whereas Alamgir locates a shortfall in food availability as a crucial variable in famine causation<sup>4</sup>, A.K.Sen specifically rejects this variable as being the crucial one in causing famines. The problem during a famine is not an absolute decline in food for all, but the severe deprivation of some. Famine starvation is "the characteristic of some people not having enough to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough to eat". For Sen, famines are essentially economic disasters, rather than primarily crises of food. He views famines as economic dislocations where people are faced with "entitlement/endowment"crises. Under famine situations the poor lose their "entitlement" which, under normal circumstances, are an individual's access to material resources which are then exchanged for food. Entitlements fail because the famine-stricken lose control of their "endowments" (i.e., what they own); or large scale shifts occur in what they can exchange for their endowments; or there is a failure of institutional (mainly state) help in alleviating the crisis<sup>5</sup>.

Arnold's essential position falls closer to that taken by Alamgir in so far as Arnold disagrees with Sen on the issue of food shortage as one of the important variables in famine causation. Arguing that food-shortages caused by climatic or other disasters provide the proximate cause of a famine, Arnold defines a famine as a "multiple crisis of subsistence, survival and order". For Arnold, famine "signifies an exceptional (if periodically recurring) event, a collective crisis of such magnitude as to cause social and economic dislocation"<sup>6</sup> (a position which closely

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.,p.14.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.,pp.81-83.

<sup>5</sup> Sen,1982: 45-48 *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Arnold,1988: 46,19,6-7.

agrees with Alamgir's notion of "substates"<sup>7</sup> generated by a famine).

The differences between Alamgir and Sen, or Arnold's critique of Sen on the question of decline in per capita availability of food, are basically formal. All agree that essentially a famine is a crisis in the very structure of a society which leads to excess deaths, long-term social and physical debilitation and severe dislocations in its economic life. They also agree that famines do not affect all social strata equally or at the same time. Sen's "crisis of entitlement" and Alamgir's typology of a "class famine" are two different expressions to convey the same meaning, i.e., the differential impact of famines on the most vulnerable ranks in society. Arnold, by providing a historian's perspective, has focussed upon the *hierarchy* of causes which lead to immense social crises like famines; proximate causes (like climatic failures or wars) are located along with the basic (or structural) causes (for example, long-term trends in production and prices, standards of living, systems and incidence of taxation, and stratification) which allow a causal reconstruction of a famine and its consequences. For Sen poverty breeds famines; for Alamgir, famine creates conditions for increasing the intensity of poverty and deprivation; and for Arnold famines and poverty are related in a cause/effect syndrome.

There is however one issue which is not central to the discussions of these scholars, and that is the problem, and impact, of dearth. Historical evidence from Western Europe provides a distinction between such occurrences and famines. Demographic patterns in pre-industrial Europe show

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<sup>7</sup> These substates are "increase in interregional migration, increase in crime, increase in incidence of fatal disease, loss of body weight, change in nutritional status, eating of "famine foods", mental disorientation, "wandering", uprooting of families, transfer of assets, and breakdown of traditional social bonds" (Alamgir, 1980: 7).

that a famine was both a crisis of subsistence and crisis of mortality; two other situations which could create severe crises of mortality were epidemics and war<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, dearth were occasioned by "bad" agricultural years. These could cause crises of subsistence but the actual scale of misery "was both regionally and socially selective"<sup>9</sup>. The extent to which dearth could become a crisis of mortality depended upon the stored-up or alternative supplies of food, or whether there was an epidemic or war in the offing. In the absence of the latter variables, a season of dearth tended to create a short-run crisis of subsistence as it tended to "shift the schedule of demand of the poor from industrial products to food products"; and the intensity of such crises depended upon the temporal spread of such bad agricultural years "especially if the victims had to resort to the consumption of their seed corn"<sup>10</sup>.

From the point of view of the present chapter, the terms famine and dearth are used to denote two distinct types of crises of survival. Famine typifies a situation when a subsistence and mortality crisis become combined in a critical conjuncture. A famine is a one-off event of calamitous proportions<sup>11</sup>. Dearth, on the other hand, represents a more continuous saga of scarcities; and although they have a lesser impact than famines, they are nevertheless important since their periodic incursions lead to a prolonged crisis of subsistence among the harvest sensitive strata (the artisans, labourers and the town

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<sup>8</sup> M.W.Flinn, 1981: 53. Interestingly, the perennial litany of the seventeenth century French peasant was "From plague, famine and Fronde, O Lord deliver us" [Le Roy Ladurie, 1977: 270].

<sup>9</sup> John Walter and Keith Wrightson, 1976: 23.

<sup>10</sup> J.D.Chambers, 1972: 13.

<sup>11</sup> Arnold also sees famine as "an exceptional event...of such magnitude as to cause social and economic dislocation" [1988: 6].

poor) as well as among the peasants, especially those (like the peasants in Bengal) working their lands with inadequate resources.

The other aspect which needs detailed analysis is what do these subsistence crises actually reflect? One of the most common assumptions is to see famines in eighteenth century Bengal as some kind of shock to traditional patterns of subsistence security; once the worst was over these "traditional" patterns would once again assert themselves, and it was not till the late nineteenth century that "the traditional Bengali system of subsistence security was threatened by new attitudes, new risks, and unprecedented scarcities"<sup>12</sup>. The obvious question which comes to mind is whether there was ever a "traditional" subsistence security in Bengal? Our evidence (discussed in chapter 1) strongly indicates a highly commercialized economy where access to food (or denial of it) was determined by markets, prices and the purchasing capacity of the purchasers. It is therefore pertinent to see whether famine and dearth in our period were the results of commercialized agriculture.

### The changing context of food-shortages in the eighteenth century

As Table 2 shows, Bengal was no stranger to acute food shortages, caused either by insufficient or excessive rains.

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Greenough, 1982: 84. This argument is very much in consonance with the ones provided by N.K. Sinha [1968: 64] and B.B. Chaudhury [1983: 299-300].



**Table 2**  
**Food shortages and natural calamities in Bengal,**  
**1700-1768.**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Type of calamity</u>	<u>Spatial Location</u>	<u>Symptoms</u>
1711	Drought	West Bengal	Scarcity and deaths
1718	Drought	all-Bengal	Scarcity
1727	Drought	Unspecified	Price Increase
1728	Drought	Unspecified	Scarcity
1732	Unspecified	Unspecified	Dearth
1734	Drought	all-Bengal	Scarcity
1737	Flood	West Bengal	Scarcity
1741	Flood	West Bengal	Mulberry crop was ruined
1742	Flood	Unspecified	Dearth
1752	Flood	all-Bengal	Scarcity and death
1755	Flood	West Bengal	High price and scarcity
1761	Unspecified	West Bengal	High prices
1763	Flood	East Bengal	Scarcity and deaths
1767	Flood	East Bengal	Partial loss to crops
1767	Drought	West Bengal	Scarcity

**Source:** Relevant volumes of BPC, IOR P/1/2 to P/1/49; Letters Received, IOR E/4/20 to E/4/30; Letters from Coast and Bay, IOR E/4/1 to E/4/6; IOR, Home Misc., vol.804, 20 November 1752, p.237; *BDR:Midnapur*, vol.1, 18 July 1767 and 10 November 1767, pp.171, 191; *ibid.*, vol.4, 30 January 1771, p.47;

Robert Orme, *Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire*, London , 1805 (original 1782), p.405.

An agricultural economy, like the one in Bengal, which depended almost exclusively on the monsoons for irrigating its fields, or for nourishing the soil by the silt deposits left by the seasonal flooding of its rivers was perhaps naturally vulnerable to periodic cycles of droughts or floods. It is also significant that of the fifteen documented cases of scarcity listed in table 2, there were only three years (1711, 1752 and 1763) in which people actually died, presumably due to starvation. In 1711 "several thousands have famished for want of rice"<sup>13</sup>. The year 1752 was described as the worst famine in the past sixty years and "many inhabitants have perished in the town [Calcutta], a truth well known to every one"<sup>14</sup>. In 1763 "many thousands are continually perishing thro' want"<sup>15</sup> and "many thousands of walking skeletons" flooded on to the streets of Calcutta<sup>16</sup>. 1738 may also have been a year of famine mortality since in 1769 the people of Purnea apparently considered it to be the worst calamity to have befallen that district "for thirty years past"<sup>17</sup>.

In a large sense, therefore, the scarcities and famines which struck the province in the late eighteenth century (and with which this thesis is centrally concerned) would appear to be part of a saga of recurring food-

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<sup>13</sup> BPC, IOR P/1/2,9 July 1711.

<sup>14</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol.804, from Govindaram Mitra to Roger Drake, 20 November 1752, p.237.

<sup>15</sup> Luke Scrafton, *Reflections on the Government & ca. of Indostan*, London 1763, p.27.

<sup>16</sup> J.Z.Holwell, *India Tracts*, London 1764, p.165.

<sup>17</sup> SCC, IOR P/A/10, 16 February 1770.

shortages. Yet, there appears to be a strong case for arguing that the ones in the late eighteenth century were more intense and had more pervasive social consequences. It is certainly undeniable that the scale of mortality in 1769/70 far exceeded the deaths described in the worst scarcities in the early part of the century. Even if one questions, as this thesis does, the general consensus that 10 million people actually died in that famine (discussed below), that fact nevertheless remains that nothing like 1769/70 had ever occurred in the province. Similarly, the cyclone and flood of 1787 was particularly disastrous in eastern Bengal since they apparently coincided with the changes in the course of the river Teesta. Therefore, the effects of the famine in 1788 were quite disastrous even though the mortality was considerably less than what seems to have occurred in 1769/70. All these issues will be discussed at length during the course of this chapter.

#### Historical reconstructions of dearth and famine in late eighteenth century Bengal: weather as a factor

The question is: how do we differentiate between dearth and famine in the context of eighteenth century Bengal? Obviously, social perceptions classified various food-crises according to their scale and magnitude. *Abhab* and *durbhikshya* are Bengali terms to differentiate between situations of scarcity (*abhab*) and situations of full-blown famines. Paul Greenough is correct in stating that the cultural perception of prosperity, and conversely of adversity, in traditional Bengali society depended on the nature of the current paddy harvest and the ways in which

different social groups were allowed access to it<sup>18</sup>. Yet dearth and famines were more than rude shocks to established cultural constructs of plenitude ("society's conception of the good life")<sup>19</sup> and scarcity. They caused severe *economic* dislocations. Production faltered, prices soared and people died. "Traditional" means of support within the community no longer sufficed to maintain social bonds, or to alleviate the sufferings of the famine stricken. Table 2.1 provides a brief outline of the number of times Bengal suffered from such occurrences between 1769 and 1800.

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<sup>18</sup> Greenough, 1982: pp.42-52. Perhaps such constructs were not unique to traditional Bengali society alone. Did traditional European societies differ substantially in their conceptions of dearth and plenty? It would be difficult to argue that they did on two grounds. First, these societies were predominantly agricultural and therefore survival was essentially harvest-dependent [Hoskins, 1968; Meuvret, 1988]. Second, each society has its own hierarchical arrangements which arranged society into prescribed slots (for instance, lord-vassal-serf) whose interdependencies were regulated by "traditional" customs and mores. The elites were culturally enjoined to be just and benign; the lower orders obedient. A "good king" who ruled with even-handedness was as much a part of the European ethos as it was Asian (or Bengali). The Bengali peasants expected to see their superiors come to their aid during times of crisis; so did their European counterparts: "it was of crucial importance for the maintenance of the social order that dearth was not only met, but was seen to be met by action on the part of the authorities" [Walter and Wrightson, 1976: 41]. It is also true that such received notions seldom worked in real life in Europe; they also failed in Bengal. Greenough's analysis suffers from labouring the assumption that they actually worked in traditional Bengali (and by extension in Asian) society.

<sup>19</sup> Greenough, 1982: 12.

Table 2.1Dearth and Famine in Bengal, 1769-1800

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occurrence</u>	<u>Spatial Location</u>	<u>Symptoms</u>
1769/70	Drought	Regional	Famine, dearth and high mortality
1773/74	Drought/Flood	Regional	Dearth, high prices
1775	Drought	West Bengal	Partial scarcity high prices
1777	Drought	West Bengal	Harvest failure, dearth and high prices
1779	Drought	West Bengal	Crops destroyed high prices and a famine panic
1783	Drought/Flood	Regional	Crop failure and "public scarcity"
1787-88	Flood	Southern and Eastern Bengal	Famine and mortality in east dearth elsewhere
1791	Drought	West Bengal	Food shortage and high prices
1793	Drought	West Bengal	Similar symptoms

Source: SCC, IOR P/A/10; relevant volumes of BRC, IOR P/49/38 to P/54/6; relevant volumes of BRP, IOR P/70/1 to P/72/37; S.Islam(ed.), *Bangladesh District Records, Dacca District*, vol. 1, 1784-87 for floods in 1783.

The significance of table 2.1 lies in the fact that it shows the recurrence of severe bouts of dearth in between two major famines. Taken together these events show

an economy particularly vulnerable to periodic cycles of scarcity occasioned by adverse cycles of weather. The connection between weather and subsistence crises therefore requires some explanation.

Under normal circumstances, Bengal produced three rice harvests, *aman*, *boro* and *aus*. *Aman* was the winter harvest which was universally sown in the Bengali month of *Assar* (June-July) and harvested in *Agrahan* (November-December). This harvest was generally considered of great market value "bearing a higher price and sought after by all"<sup>20</sup>. The other major crop was that of *aus* (spring), sown in *Baisakh* (April-May) and reaped in *Bhadro* (August-September). Compared to the winter crop, the spring harvest was intrinsically inferior, being consumed overwhelmingly by the "lowest and poorest classes"<sup>21</sup>. *Boro* rice was an intermediate crop producing the coarsest quality rice which was sown in *Chaitra* (March-April) on extremely low lands<sup>22</sup> and reaped in either *Assar* (June-July) or *Srawan* (July-August). Therefore unlike the two major crops which required a gestation period of six months, the *boro* was a quick-ripening crop, capable of providing a harvest in four months<sup>23</sup>. Moreover this crop was not produced in all areas of Bengal. For instance, it was not grown in Burdwan, Purnea and Midnapur<sup>24</sup>, which perhaps indicates its relative insignificance in the overall supply of food in the province.

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<sup>20</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, Grain Branch, vol.1, 17 October 1794.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> In Rajshahi it was cultivated "chiefly in beds of lakes and in the nullahs" (small water courses)" [WBSA, CCRM, vol.5, 30 April 1771].

<sup>23</sup> See, BRP, IOR P/70/40, Appendix to Proceedings of April 1788 for a detailed description of types of rice produced in different districts of Bengal.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Then there were those crops which were grown by the peasants purely for sale in the market, or for their conversion into artisanal produce. Table 2.2 illustrates the cropping patterns of some of the principal "cash" crops in eighteenth century Bengal.

Table 2.2  
Cropping patterns of some "cash crops" in  
the eighteenth century

<u>Crop</u>	<u>Month sown</u>	<u>Month harvested</u>
Cotton	October-November	May-June
Betel	All year through	
Mulberry	April-May <sup>25</sup>	August-September
Tobacco	July-August	January-February or February-March
Various types of lentils	Between April-May and August-September	January-February and March-April

Source: BRP, IOR P/70/40, Appendix to Proceedings  
of April 1788

Bengal also depended almost exclusively on the monsoons for irrigating its fields, or for nourishing the soil by the silt deposits left by the seasonal flooding of its rivers<sup>26</sup>. For obvious reasons droughts caused immediate

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<sup>25</sup> The berries sprouted in April-May (*Baisakh*).

<sup>26</sup> The silt "which on the waters subsiding settles on the lands, fertilizes them, and affords the Ryots [cultivators] a very great

problems for agriculture<sup>27</sup> but the scale of the subsequent scarcity depended upon the intensity of the drought. A temporary delay in the monsoon was easily accommodated with the minimum of difficulty. Each village had its own tanks and ponds, dug by the local landed-proprietors or by individual peasant families, "from religious or other motives" which were used to irrigate the adjoining fields in the "event of the rains ceasing before the crops approach maturity"<sup>28</sup>. These tanks were used to irrigate those fields which were sown with crops considered most valuable to the peasants. Such fields were known as the *colla* (high) lands which were utilized to cultivate the commercially valuable crops (lentils, onions, mustard and flax for oil) along with mulberry for silk worms, tobacco and raw cotton<sup>29</sup>. Relatively lower lands were meant for the cultivation of *aman* rice. The *jala* lands (literally water prone), so-called because of their situation in close proximity to river banks or streams, were primarily used

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<sup>26</sup>(...continued)  
paddy], turcaree [vegetables] and pulse" [BRC, IOR P/52/38, 19 November 1791].

<sup>27</sup> Writing in 1776, Philip Francis had the following to say about the connection between climate and agricultural production in Bengal:

The proportionate value of lands fluctuate in all countries according to the immediate industry and ability of the owners. In Bengal more particularly it depends on accidents of drought, inundation or favourable season, of which no general calculation can be formed.

Minute dated, 5 November 1776 in BRC, IOR P/49/65, 5 November 1776.

<sup>28</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/36, 21 October 1791.

<sup>29</sup> Brit. Mus., Add. Ms., 19286, f.2. *Colla* lands were usually divided into three categories, (i) *colla bast bari*, homesteads, (ii) *colla do-fasli*, lands producing two harvests a year and (iii) *colla sih-fasli*, lands producing three harvests a year [see WBSA, PCR: Burdwan, vol. 1, 23 May 1774].



for the cultivation of the lower grade grains of the spring (*aus*) and *boro*<sup>30</sup> crops of rice<sup>31</sup>, and for the cultivation of various edible farinaceous-roots (*kochu*) which were used as essential food-supplements especially by the poor<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> An intermediate rice crop between the winter and spring harvests.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. In Jessore and Rajshahi, part of the *aus* and the whole of the *boro* paddy was cultivated "chiefly in beds of lakes and in the nullahs and jheels" [WBSA, CCRM, vol. 5, 30 April 1771].

<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, potatoes were not an integral part of the Bengali diet in the eighteenth century, partly because of the high costs of cultivating them and partly because of the numerous tubers which were easily available [see chapter 5].

Weather and dearth, the case of drought

When a drought hit, the *colla* land was immediately affected. This had two implications for the life of the inhabitants. First, some of the finest quality rice grown in the *aman* harvest were immediately threatened. Next in line were the "cash" crops of tobacco, mulberry and cotton. A short-fall in both the sectors meant that both peasant and artisanal incomes were jeopardized. Second, droughts also impinged on the water stocks necessary for the physical survival of the rural population. Ponds (*dighi*) dried-up and the water levels in wells receded. The former affected the amount of water which cultivators could give to their standing crops, whereas the latter reduced the availability of potable water. Thus during the drought of 1791, the Board of Revenue instructed the collectors of revenue "to enjoin their officers to be careful to leave in the tanks and reservoirs in question a quantity of water sufficient for the consumption of the inhabitants of those villages which have usually been supplied from them"<sup>33</sup>.

Obviously the magnitude of the crisis depended upon the intensity of the drought. The worst recorded case of this type was in 1769, when a drought, lasting for six months from August 1769 to January 1770, created havoc in the economy of western Bengal. This drought was unprecedented "insomuch as the oldest inhabitants never remember anything like it"<sup>34</sup>. The rice lands had "so harden'd for want of water, that the ryotts have found a difficulty in ploughing and preparing it for the next crop"<sup>35</sup>, and the fields of rice "parched by the heat of the

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<sup>33</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/36, Minute of the Board of Revenue, 21 October 1791.

<sup>34</sup> IOR Home Misc., vol. 102, p. 94.

<sup>35</sup> SCC, IOR P/A/8, 29 November 1769.

sun are become like fields of straw"<sup>36</sup>. Water resources were critically hit. The intensity of the drought meant that the cultivators desperately tapped their ponds etc. for supplies which soon dried up: "water in lakes & reservoirs... was soon exhausted by the Ryotts in watering their rice grounds. Yet notwithstanding their industrious endeavours, no crop was produced but the water was expended", and these tanks "from the extreme drought have become parched and barren"<sup>37</sup>.

The drought also damaged those crops which were crucial to Bengal's artisanal production. Thus by November 1769:

The Ryotts find themselves totally incapacitated to cultivate the valuable crops of Cotton and Mulberries and the inferior ones of Gram, Pease, Barley, Tobacco, Betel leaf & ca. *which succeed the rice harvest*<sup>38</sup>.

It is quite obvious from looking at table 2.2 that the drought of 1769 ruined the produce from the highly-valued sectors of Bengal's economy<sup>39</sup> and this perhaps explains the subsequent misery faced by the artisans.

Fortunately, Bengal did not face another drought of a similar magnitude during the remaining years of the eighteenth century. Yet droughts did occur and exerted their influence on the state of harvests. There was a threat of a scarcity in 1773, but it was apparently short-

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., P/A/10, 28 April 1770.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 28 April 1770, pp. 192, 197.

<sup>38</sup> BPC, IOR P/1/44, 20 November 1769; emphasis added.

<sup>39</sup> Thus in April 1770, Asad-ul-Zaman Khan, the *zamindar* of Birbhum wrote to the Select Committee that "the cultivation is render'd fruitless by the dryness of the season and no Hope is left of the Cotton Harvest" [SCC, IOR P/A/10, 28 April 1770].

lived. According to Warren Hastings, "vigorous and early measures were taken for its removal and succeeded"<sup>40</sup>. The monsoon of 1774 failed, and by August the Company's administrators had begun worrying about "the late unusual drought [and] the damage which the grain crops have already sustained by the want of rain"<sup>41</sup>. Parallels with the 1769 situation were raised when the rice withered and peasants "turned their cows into the rice fields to graze upon it"<sup>42</sup>. The winter and spring rice harvests of 1775 were said to be in a "sorry state" owing to another drought, and the peasants "find it very difficult to fulfil their kists [payment of revenue]"<sup>43</sup>. In 1777 western Bengal "hath so little rain fallen here this season, that there are the most alarming appearances... and both farmers and inhabitants of all ranks are under great apprehensions"<sup>44</sup>. A drought in 1779 had jeopardized the cultivation of the winter rice: "the sowing lands are waste, the arable not ploughed" in western Bengal, whereas in the east crops of cotton, sugarcane and rice had suffered extensive damage<sup>45</sup>. The drought in 1783 had raised "the present apprehension of a public scarcity arising from the deficiencies of a late harvest and the appearances of a similar failure in the present crop"<sup>46</sup>. In 1791 the "unpromising appearance of crops, and little prospect of a speedy fall of rain" had raised the spectre of "an impending calamity" in the

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<sup>40</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/68, 20 November 1783.

<sup>41</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/46, 23 August 1774.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., P/49/47, 30 August 1774.

<sup>43</sup> WBSA, PCR, Murshidabad, vol. 7, 4 December 1775.

<sup>44</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/48, 22 December 1775.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., vol. 21, 23 May 1779, 25 May 1779 and 30 May 1779.

<sup>46</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/68, 20 November 1783; also see *ibid.*, P/50/46, 1 July 1783 and P/50/51, 26 March 1784 for statements of crop failures in Midnapur and 24-Parganas respectively.

province<sup>47</sup>.

Droughts therefore took their toll of harvests and seriously affected food supplies; but the degree to which both were affected depended upon the intensity and the duration of these phenomena. Thus 1769 became a year of a major famine whereas the other years of drought were limited to being years of dearth. Another feature of droughts, perhaps peculiar to Bengal, was the geographical asymmetry of such occurrences. For example, the intense drought of 1769 ravaged with its greatest severity in seven districts of west and north-east Bengal<sup>48</sup>, the rest of the province (especially the south-western and south-eastern parts) were relatively unaffected<sup>49</sup>. The latter areas did receive copious amounts of rain and "the rivers have overflowed & fertilized the lands, *even in this remarkably dry season*"<sup>50</sup>: a feature which is noticeable from the relative state of rice prices in lower (i. e., southern) Bengal as revealed in Figure 11 (p. 93). A study of later droughts also confirms this regional picture.

The drought of 1773 was characterized by a similar geographical asymmetry. While the Council of Revenue worried about an "approaching scarcity", and some districts did report an estimated shortfall of "one third of the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., P/52/36, 21 October 1791.

<sup>48</sup> These were the districts of Rangpur, Birbhum, Nadia, Murshidabad, Dinajpur, Jessore and Rajshahi.

<sup>49</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/52, 7 April 1775; BDR, Midnapur, vol. 4, no. 91, 7 March 1771; FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/1, 28 September 1770 and G/27/2, 22 February 1771 and 25 March 1771; WBSA, CCRM, vol. 6, 29 September 1771; BPC, IOR P/1/44, 14 November 1769 and 20 November 1769; SCC, IOR P/A/10, 30 March 1770 for statements of the spatial asymmetry of the drought of 1769.

<sup>50</sup> SCC, IOR P/A/10, 30 March 1770; emphasis added. In general droughts were never considered a major barrier to agricultural production in east Bengal, "these being pernicious to the crops of the upper or northern pergunnahs [districts]" of the province [IOR Home Misc., vol. 206, pp. 212-13].

usual produce"<sup>51</sup>, the food and price situation in other areas was strikingly different. The districts of Bishnupur and Burdwan (in west Bengal) were said to be in the throes of a "great cheapness of grain" owing to good harvests<sup>52</sup>. In the east, the districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur had such plentiful harvests that in 1773 there was an "extraordinary cheapness of the necessaries of life [which] has been of great disservice to the collections [of revenue]"<sup>53</sup>. The cheapness (caused by available stocks) of grain in these districts carried on into 1774<sup>54</sup>, at a time when western Bengal was said to be suffering a "late unusual drought"<sup>55</sup>. Here the crops had withered to such an extent that the cultivators, for instance of Purnea, "daily complain loudly... that great part of their crop is scorched up, and is daily spoiling more and more"<sup>56</sup>; others (in Birbhum) had given up their hopes of reaping the winter harvest of rice and had "turned their cows into their fields to graze upon them"<sup>57</sup>. The situation in 1775 was characterized by a delayed monsoon. The rains not having arrived up to the end of July caused "the most alarming appearances" of scarcity, but by early August "a very plentiful fall of rain" had "relieved the minds of the people"<sup>58</sup>. Finally the failure of the rains in 1779, which jeopardized the winter harvest and ruined the cash crops in some regions of west and east Bengal paradoxically occurred, amidst " a great plenty of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., P/49/42, 21 December 1773.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., P/49/39, 27 March 1773 for Bishnupur, and 6 April 1773 for Burdwan.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., P/49/40, 14 and 26 June 1773.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., P/49/46, 31 May 1774.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., P/49/46, 23 August 1774.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 19 August 1774.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., P/49/47, 30 August 1774.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., IOR P/49/58, 27 July 1775 and 3 August 1775 contained in appendix to consultations of 22 December 1775.

grain" in southern Bengal and a price situation so low that the "Ryotts cannot dispose of their crops"<sup>59</sup>.

The role of the *jala* lands was also of particular importance during droughts. Situated in close proximity to water-channels, these lands retained their intrinsic moisture for a longer duration than the *colla* lands, and were therefore capable of producing the quick-ripening crop of *boro* paddy even in the middle of a drought. Eastern and southern Bengal were the most favoured in this respect. Such areas, being prone to seasonal water-logging, managed to retain crucial supplies of water during a dry season in the rest of the province<sup>60</sup>. Thus during the drought-induced famine of 1769-70, the low-lying districts of Dhaka and Bakarganj continued to furnish the "greatest supplies of grain to the [Bengal] Presidency"<sup>61</sup>. Further west, rice was produced in adequate quantities in the *jala* lands of Midnapur<sup>62</sup> during that famine, so did the district of 24-Parganas which was situated in close proximity to Calcutta:

Owing entirely to [its] situation, which being low [it] retained what rainfall and enabled the people to water and preserve their crops [and] this aided so much to moderating the price of grain<sup>63</sup>.

The spatial asymmetry of such droughts had a very significant effect on the flow of food, and on the activities of grain-merchants, in situations of famine and

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., P/50/18, 20 April 1779 and the districts mentioned as having such low prices were those of Burdwan and Bishnupur.

<sup>60</sup> See Ibid., P/51/17, 20 December 1787 for a statement of such lands in the active delta of eastern Bengal.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., P/49/52, 7 April 1775.

<sup>62</sup> *BDR, Midnapur*, vol. 4, no. 91, 7 March 1771.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., P/49/52, 7 April 1775.

dearth, whose implications will be discussed below.

Weather and dearth, the case of floods

Unlike western Bengal, which was prone to periodic incursions of droughts, floods were an endemic problem in eastern and southern Bengal<sup>64</sup>. Here one has to distinguish between seasonal overflowing of its rivers and floods. Normally floods between three and six feet on low lands did not endanger the standing winter crop of rice as the grain naturally grew to keep its ear above water; but floods above six feet in height destroyed the crop<sup>65</sup>. Such seasonal floods were a part of the agricultural life in eastern Bengal, as James Rennell's description shows:

By the latter end of July, all the lower parts of Bengal, contiguous to the Ganges and the Berrampooter are overflowed and form an inundation of more than a hundred miles in width<sup>66</sup>.

The natural ingredients of a favourable agricultural season in the district of Dhaka were described by James Taylor as

A high inundation in the preceding year, followed in the cold season by a moderate fall of rain which enables the husbandman to plough his land. This succeeded by frequent, but not heavy showers, in the spring months, and subsequently by a gradual rise of the rivers, constitutes the most favourable

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., P/49/52, 7 April 1775.

<sup>65</sup> Alamgir, 1980: 109; P.J. Marshall, 1987: 25.

<sup>66</sup> *Memoir Of A Map Of Indostan*, London 1793, p.349.



weather for the growth of rice<sup>67</sup>.

Flood waters had to rise above six feet to be able to damage standing crops. A flood of this magnitude occurred in 1786-87 (discussed below). There are other recorded cases of floods but these were more localized in nature, caused by rivers which either overflowed their embankments or breached them in places. Such seems to have occurred in the districts of Jessore and Rajshahi in 1770 and 1771, when some crops were reportedly destroyed<sup>68</sup>; but the damage actually caused appears to have been quickly recouped as the month of September 1771 did see an "extraordinary cheapness of grain" in Rajshahi<sup>69</sup>. Some damage to crops were also reported by inundations in 1773, when the river Damodar overflowed its banks in some low-lying areas in the district of Burdwan<sup>70</sup>. In 1773, the district of Laskarpur suffered from the floods of the Padma and Burril rivers which:

Not only operated to this pergunnahs prejudice by destroying the harvest on the ground and sweeping away whole villages, ruining the Ryotts & occasioning great desertion; but when the water subsided, they left large tracts of land which was before cultivated, entirely choaked up with sand & so impoverished as to preclude all hopes of bringing it again into cultivation<sup>71</sup>.

Crops were also partially damaged in Midnapur because

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<sup>67</sup> Taylor, 1840: 295.

<sup>68</sup> FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/1, 28 September 1770 and 25 March 1771.

<sup>69</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol. 6, 29 September 1771.

<sup>70</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/41, 23 September 1773; *ibid.*, P/49/42, 2 November 1773.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, P/49/44, 29 December 1773.

"of the inundations in the beginning of September 1773"<sup>72</sup>. It is certainly true that the inundations of 1773-74 destroyed the standing crops in some areas and therefore "impoverished the Ryotts"<sup>73</sup>. Yet the impression which also appears inescapable is that the damage done was partial and limited to those lands having the lowest topographical situation. In Burdwan the worst affected were "those pergunnahs situated on the banks of the Damoodah [Damodar]", other *parganas* were only marginally affected<sup>74</sup>. The fact that the "extraordinary cheapness of grain" said to be prevailing in 1773 (discussed above) would strongly suggest that the floods were relatively localized.

The flood of 1787 was entirely different from these instances. Two reasons made this event so different. First there was a freak monsoon in that year which began from the month of March 1787. The rains continued without let-up till July, by which time "nothing but a sheet of water" was to be seen in most areas of eastern Bengal<sup>75</sup>. Second, there was a major cyclone in the east which commenced from 30 October 1787 and lasted with *undiminished* intensity till 2 November. The cyclone was the proverbial last straw on the province's back. Practically the whole of eastern Bengal was devastated<sup>76</sup>. Villages were under "7, 8 & 9 feet under water"<sup>77</sup>. A flood of such magnitude was accompanied by

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., P/49/46, 24 May 1774.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., P/49/42, 2 November 1773.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., P/49/41, 1 October 1773.

<sup>75</sup> The districts of Dinajpur, Mymensing and Chittagong were said to be "in absolute state of inundation", *ibid.*, P/51/9, 9 August 1787.

<sup>76</sup> There is much material on the cyclone of 1787 in BRC, IOR P/51/9 to P/51/15.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., P/51/22, 25 June 1788. Villages were invariably situated on relatively higher ground, and this evidence  
(continued...)

"destruction of cattle, the blowing down of vast number of trees and levelling the houses of the poorer people and unthaching and unroofing of others... "78. People drowned and died as entire villages were swept away79, standing crops were destroyed by as much as 50 percent in some areas80, and the flood-afflicted streamed in large numbers to Calcutta and Murshidabad81. The spectre of a full-blown famine once again stalked the province. Yet it must be emphasized that the combined effects of the unusually heavy monsoon and the cyclone were largely concentrated in eastern and south-western Bengal82. Elsewhere, for instance in Burdwan and Nadia, floods caused by rivers overflowing their banks (or breaching embankments) destroyed habitations and damaged the standing crop83. Therefore the famine which followed was concentrated primarily in those areas where floods and the cyclone had wreaked the worst damage. Elsewhere there were problems created by the spill-over effects from the famine hit districts which manifested (as will be discussed below) in high prices and dearth, but not in any excess mortality.

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77(...continued)  
indicates the height to which the flood waters may have attained in low-lying areas.

78 Ibid., P/51/13, 24 November 1787.

79 Ibid., P/51/13, 25 November 1787.

80 Ibid., P/51/22, 25 June 1788. \*

81 Ibid., P/51/25, 1 October 1788; WBSA, BRFW, vol.3, part 2, 29 August 1787.

82 Memoir of Sir George Campbell in J.C.Geddes, 1874: 426-27.

83 BRC, IOR P/51/12, 16 October 1787 for damage to crops in Nadia, and ibid., P/51/13, 25 October 1787 for floods in Burdwan.

Weather, dearth, famine and food availability

The preceding discussion has perhaps shown the crucial influence exerted by vagaries of weather on the state of harvests, and on the food situation in the province. Droughts meant that either standing crops withered, or that the lands were rendered unfit for sowing the next crop. It is a fact that the droughts which came after the one of 1769 (a year of a major famine) were not particularly severe as to cause a famine on a provincial scale. Yet they were serious enough to cause food-shortages at localized levels, and such shortages, this chapter suggests, characterizes a situation of dearth as short-run and localized crises of subsistence. But the events of 1769-70 had deeply influenced the province's psyche, and this fact meant that even partial scarcities raised fears of an impending famine. Thus the drought in 1773 was enough to "alarm the inhabitants with apprehension of a renewal of their recent sufferings from famine"<sup>84</sup>.

Floods also caused similar situations and fears. The important aspect to be borne in mind regarding floods is the distinction between seasonal inundations and floods which destroyed crops and livestock, thereby creating dearth or, as in 1788, a famine. It seems that a proper monsoon, characterized by regular rainfall between the months of July and September, was ideally suited for such inundations<sup>85</sup>, but unseasonal (post-monsoon) rains tended to cause floods and destroyed crops. Even a severe monsoon could cause a devastating flood: "the annual inundations if sudden in the month of Assar [June-July] are extremely

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., P/49/42, 7 December 1773.

<sup>85</sup> James Rennell considered the rain during this period ideal for the cultivation of rice as it "saves them [the peasants] the trouble of watering their lands, and keeping them in the state required for the production of that grain" [IOR, Home Misc., vol. 765, 31 August 1765, p. 147].

destructive, for the Aumun [winter rice] is at that time growing and tender & the Ous [spring rice] is ready to cut"<sup>86</sup>

The questions which emerge at this juncture are: what portion of the crops were actually destroyed by adversities of weather? What implications did such shrinkages have for the net availability of food? What (from the perspective of food-availability decline) was a dearth-warning, as distinct from a famine-warning?

Table 2.3 outlines the connection between harvest failures and their outcome for some years for which data are available.

Table 2.3  
Harvest Damage in Dearth and Famine

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occurrence</u>	<u>Portion of crop destroyed</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
1769/70	Drought	50 percent to 28 percent	Famine
1775	Drought	33.3 to 37.5 percent	Dearth
1779	Drought	25 percent	Dearth
1786/87	Flood	37.5 to 50 percent	Famine
1791	Drought	33 percent	Dearth

Source: WBSA, Proceedings of the Select Committee, vol.4, proceedings of July 1770, p.444; *BDR, Chittagong*, vol.1, 30 November 1769; WBSA, Murshidabad, vol.6, 11 September 1775; *Ibid.*, vol.11, 25 May 1779, 30 May 1779 and 7 June 1779; BRC, IOR P/51/22, 25 June 1788; BRP, IOR P/71/45, 16 November 1791.

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<sup>86</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol.385, 15 July 1789, p.327

It is perhaps clear from table 2.3 that dearth and famines did occur when harvests fell short; and the scale of this shrinkage determined the boundaries between the two types of crises. Interestingly, both years when famines were recorded show an agricultural output reduced by a maximum of 50 percent; whereas instances of dearth were caused by a smaller reduction of output. Therefore a clear correlation does seem to exist between decline in per capita availability of food (caused by harvests falling short) and the scale, or nature, of the subsequent crisis of subsistence.

The case for the real decline in the availability of food comes into sharper relief from the state's perception of what happened to food-supplies during years of scarcity. In a Minute, dated 21 October 1791, the Board of Revenue noted that in a famine, or even in case of a serious dearth, it was very difficult to meet the shortfall by imports since "the Bengal monsoon prevailing throughout the inland countries with which we have any communication, they are generally involved in the same calamity, and instead of being able to afford assistance, depend upon us for the supplies of their own wants". Therefore overland supplies of food were obviously inadequate in meeting any part of the provincial demand. Supplies by sea was seen as a feasible, though expensive, option but the difficulty with this was that "no judgment can be formed of the harvests until the month of October<sup>87</sup>" and the possibility of a scarcity at that stage meant that "a considerable time must elapse before the ships which may happen to be lying in the river unemployed can be fitted out, as the owners ascertain from what countries the rice can be procured at a price that will render it worth their while to import it". The other problem with the importation of rice was the apparently fluctuating prices of agricultural produce in the province: "as the failure of the crops in one season

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<sup>87</sup> The reference obviously is to the most important rice of the winter harvest.

occasions the price of grain to rise to an exorbitant height, so an abundant harvest in the next reduces it to a very low value; unless therefore the rice is imported before the next crops come to maturity the importer is liable to sustain a considerable loss". Provision of food at affordable prices by imports was not feasible under such conditions, and as the Board noted any relief by this mechanism was insignificant, and that the province had "only its internal resources to depend upon"<sup>88</sup>.

Also crucial to the question of food-availability decline was the manner of its internal distribution<sup>89</sup> during seasons of scarcity (discussed in chapter 6). Two features were of central importance here: (i) the spatial asymmetry of adverse weather meant that stocks of food could be procured elsewhere in the province, albeit at high prices, and (ii) the entire range of local trade in agricultural produce was handled by a specialized community of grain-merchants<sup>90</sup>. As soon as there was even a semblance of scarcity, these merchants purchased grain from areas with relatively greater surpluses and moved their stocks to the deficient places, especially to the cities, to be sold at high prices. Their strategies were facilitated because they owned, or controlled the means of bulk transportation, and they possessed store-houses (*golahs*) where rice and paddy could be stored for up to ten years without damage<sup>91</sup>. Producers in relatively unaffected districts had no choice but to sell their surpluses as they were almost without exception tied to these merchants through an elaborate system of production and consumption loans, which meant

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<sup>88</sup> For the Board's Minute, BRC, IOR P/52/36, 21 October 1791.

<sup>89</sup> Here the term distribution is being used to denote the movement of foodgrain in bulk from one area to another by merchants and not to the charitable distribution of relief during famines.

<sup>90</sup> See R. Datta, 1986: 379-403.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., pp. 399-401.

that their end produce was already hypothecated to the grain trader even before they actually sowed their lands<sup>92</sup>. The net results of all these schemes were that spot prices in less deficient places also rose, thereby hitting the harvest-dependent non-agricultural population there, and the food which came in to the deficit regions was sold at such high prices that the most vulnerable could barely purchase it. The following description of the dearth of 1791 shows the connection between harvest failures and a noticeable decline in the availability of food:

The bazars have hitherto been sufficiently well supplied to answer the immediate wants of the inhabitants, but the alarm of an approaching scarcity is now become so universal that the poorer sort of people will shortly experience considerable distress, as the price of grain and the difficulty of procuring it, even for money, is daily increasing<sup>93</sup>.

Starvation by the poor was clearly the inevitable outcome of any kind of harvest failure. They were made "at once bereft of present subsistence and future occupation"<sup>94</sup>.

#### Price as a factor in famine and dearth

Central to this discussion is the notion that both famines and dearth were crises of subsistence of differing intensities whose initial conditions were created by a shortage in the quantity of the harvest. The other factor

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p.395-97; R.Datta, 1989; also chapter 6 below.

<sup>93</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/37, 23 November 1791.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, P/50/58, 22 April 1785.



which was equally crucial in both cases (famine or dearth) was the state of agricultural prices because food-shortages are occasions of high prices, and the extent to which prices climb, and the damage they cause, depends on the temporal spread of such shortages.

In a later study of famines in Bengal W. W. Hunter pointed to the critically small dividing line between a famine warning and a famine point in the province, the central indicator of which was the price situation. "In Bengal", wrote Hunter, "even the slightest rise in the prices of agricultural produce makes a whole difference between a famine warning and famine point. The few farthings which signify little to the European consumer mean actual famine to the population of Bengal"<sup>95</sup>. This statement suggests a clear connection between supplies of food and prices and between purchasing power and subsistence, and there is ample evidence to show the existence of such connections on a widespread basis in Bengal's economy of the eighteenth century<sup>96</sup>.

At what price-point did a dearth arise, and at what point did a famine occur? Figures 11 and 12 (pp. 93 and 94) show the extent to which winter rice prices rose during the famines of 1769/70 and 1788. Figure 13 (p. 95) reflects the state of prices in Midnapur in the former famine, whereas Figure 14 (p. 97) reveals a comparative picture of rice prices in seven Bengal districts during the famine of 1788. Some other evidence for 1769/70 also suggest an extremely steep rise in price. For instance rice prices had gone up 500 percent in a season in Purnea during that famine. In Murshidabad prices climbed from 1. 14 rupees a maund (in July 1770) to 2. 5 rupees in August. At Calcutta prices

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<sup>95</sup> W.W.Hunter, 1869: 16-17.

<sup>96</sup> Datta, 1986: 379-403; Datta, 1989.

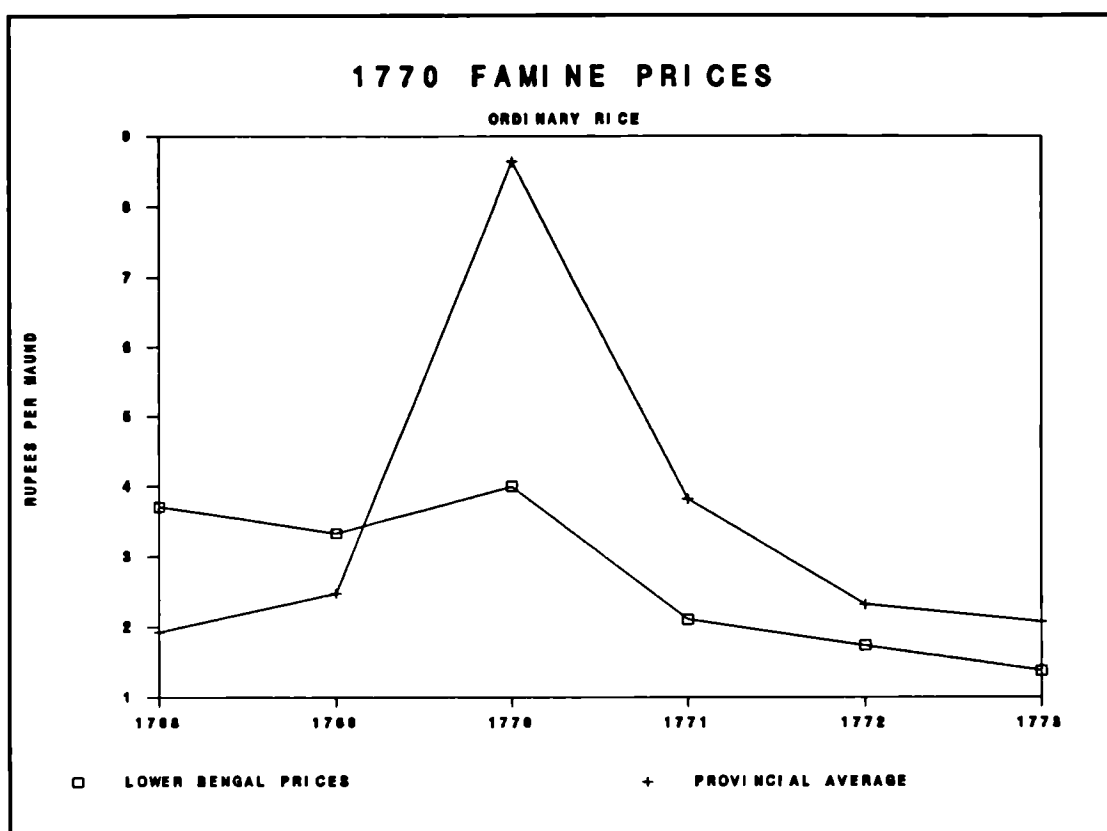


FIGURE 11

Source: *Gleanings in Science*, volume 1, January 1829; Hussain, "A Quantitative Study", pp. 271-72.

ranged from 1 rupee a maund in 1769 to 0. 77 rupee in 1770<sup>97</sup>. The relative cheapness of rice in Calcutta was mainly due to the Company's strategy of stocking provisions to feed the city, notwithstanding which 76,000 people reportedly died on its streets between July and September 1770<sup>98</sup>. But the price rise in 1788 suggests that the Company failed to take adequate measures to alleviate the crisis in the city.

<sup>97</sup> See SCC, IOR P/A/10, 16 February 1770; WBSA, Select Committee Proceedings, vol. 2, proceedings of July 1770; W.B. Bayly, 1816: 560-61.

<sup>98</sup> cf. A. Mitra, 1951: 11.

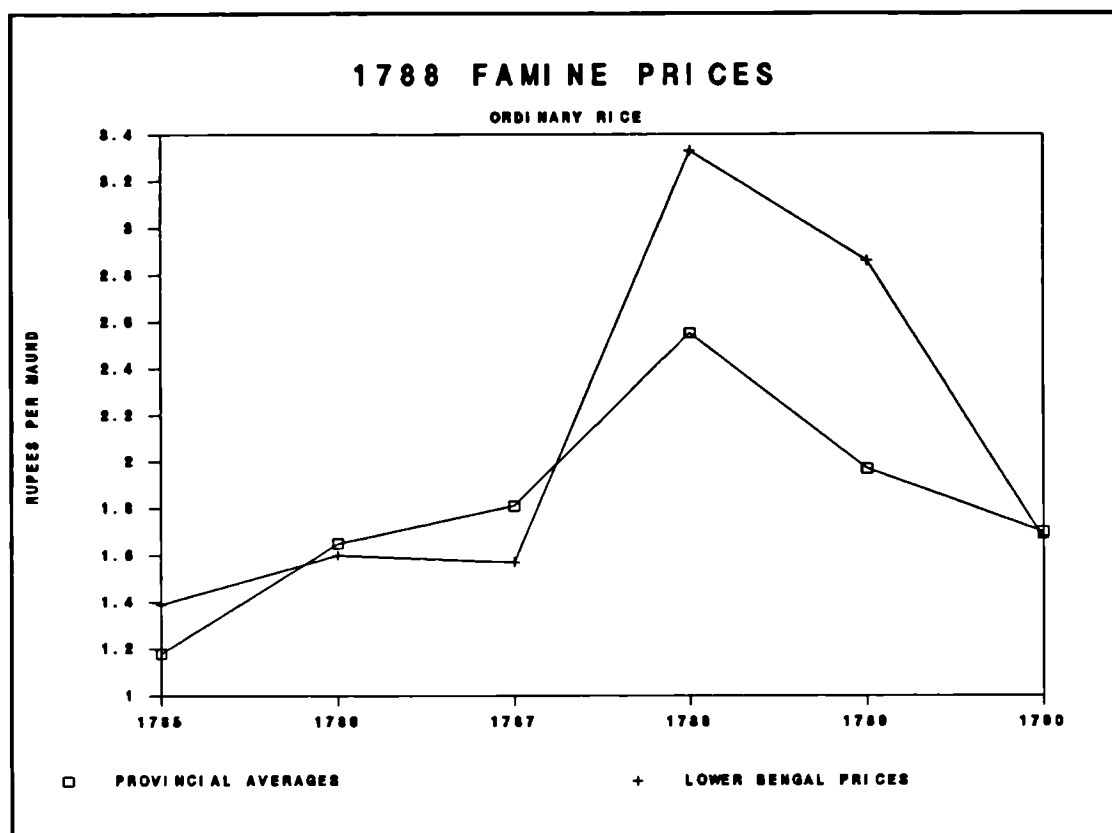


FIGURE 12

Source: As cited in Figure 11.

Table 2.4 makes an attempt to present the largely scattered price data of dearth in a somewhat comprehensible fashion.

Table 2.4

Rice Prices under Dearth in the late eighteenth century (rupees per maund)

Month/Year	District	Price
1773	Burdwan	0.49

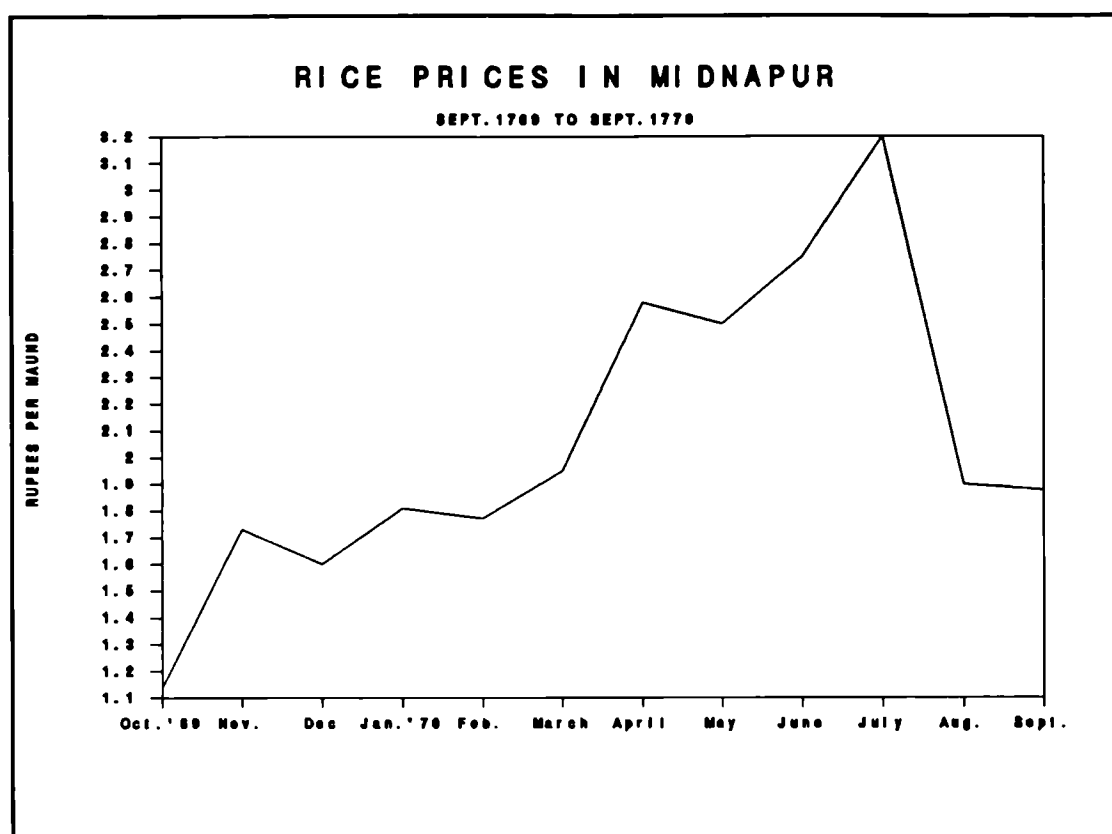


FIGURE 13

Source: Price, 1876: 83.

Table 2.4 (continued)

1774	Burdwan	0.57
1773	Chittagong	0.54
1774	Chittagong	0.61
1774	Rajshahi	0.60
1775	Rajshahi	0.80
1774	Laskarpur	0.60
1775	Laskarpur	0.82
1784	Dhaka	2.22*
March 1791	Rangpur	0.66
June 1791	Rangpur	1.05

January 1791	Murshidabad	1.14
February 1792	Murshidabad	1.49

\*: The previous price is not known, but 1784 was a localized famine in Dhaka.

Source: for prices between 1773 and 1775, BRC, IOR P/49/42, P/49/44, P/49/47, P/49/54; WBSA, PCR, Murshidabad, vol.3, 18 August 1774 and vol.6, 11 September 1775; S.Islam, *Bangladesh District Records*, op.cit., p.98; BRC, IOR P/52/32, 30 May 1791; Ibid., P/52/40, 6 January 1791 and 24 February 1792

These price data show that typically famine prices were characterized by a sudden steep rise; prices in dearth also rose sharply but not to the same extent. The other important aspect of price behaviour during a famine is the uniformity with which prices rose throughout the province. Thus in the famine of 1788, the average selling price of rice in the cities of Calcutta, Murshidabad and Dhaka was 1.84 rupees per maund; in Bakarganj (which was recognized as one of Bengal's granaries and had continued to supply rice to Calcutta during the height of the 1769/70 famine) rice prices had shot up to an all-time high of 1.05 rupees<sup>99</sup>. The intensity with which prices rose during a famine provides an important insight into the probable cause of the starvation deaths which occurred. Obviously when the price of basic staples rose by as much as 500 per cent (for instance in Purnea in 1769/70), deaths by starvation were bound to follow. Moreover high prices in the epicentre of the famine had a spill-over impact on the

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<sup>99</sup> Compare BRC, IOR P/51/16 and P/51/17, 23 January 1788, 1 February 1788 and 19 March 1788.

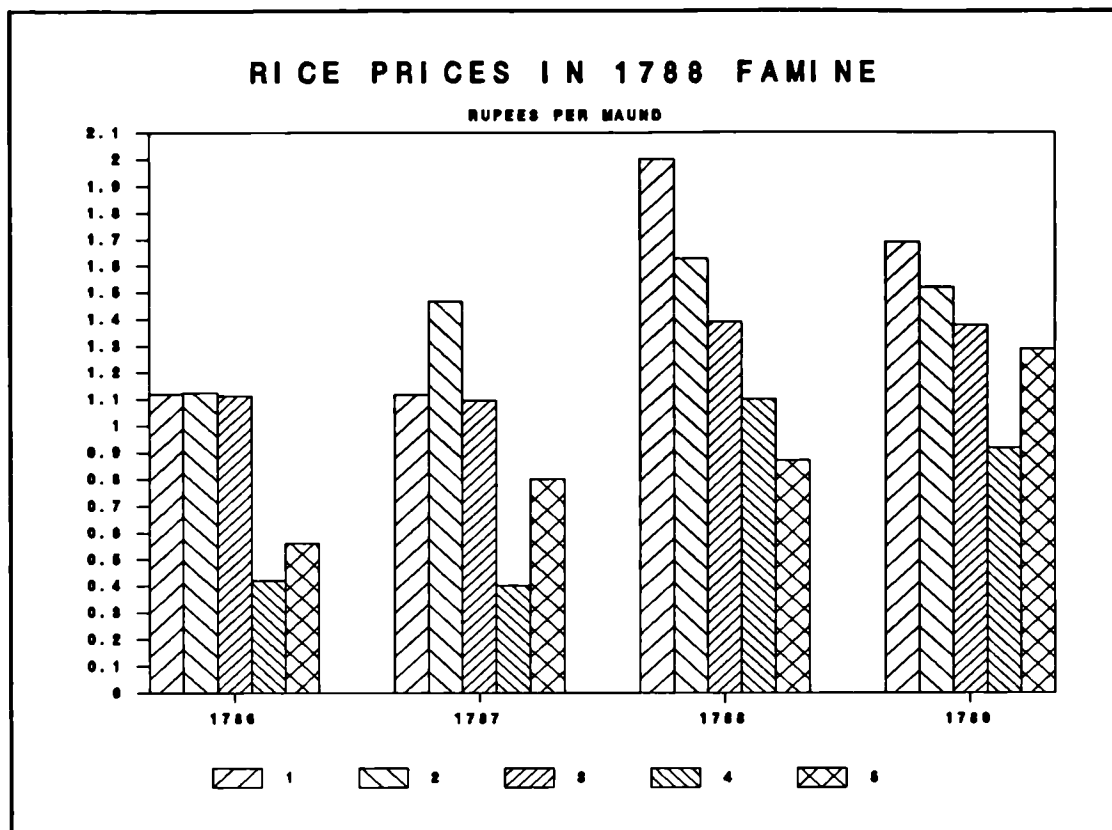


FIGURE 14

Legend: 1: Calcutta; 2: Midnapur; 3: Dinajpur; 4: Mymensing; 5: Birbhum.

Source: Calcutta, BRC, IOR P/51/17 and P/51/34; Midnapur, Dinajpur and Mymensing, BRC, IOR P/51/12, P/51/16, P/51/17, P/51/19 and P/51/34; Birbhum, W.B. Bayly, 1816.

prices in relatively unaffected areas<sup>100</sup>. What we are not sure is whether these spill-over effects actually caused starvation deaths in these latter areas.

<sup>100</sup> Thus during the famine of 1769/70, grain-merchants flooded to Midnapur, where some stocks of rice were still available, and forced an escalation in price [Price, 1876: 83]. Similarly, Mymensing which had food-stocks during the crisis of 1787/88 was invaded by merchants eager to purchase rice and paddy; consequently prices rose sharply in April 1788 [BRC, IOR P/51/17, 1 February 1788].

Certainly therefore the price situation was an important factor in causing famine deaths. People died because they could not purchase their subsistence the prevailing prices. Yet foodgrain shortage did not automatically lead to excess mortality. A dearth was relatively free from such deaths. "Foodgrain shortage", says Alamgir, "only when translated into *prolonged* foodgrain *intake* decline, causes death"<sup>101</sup>, and it is this phenomenon which perhaps explains the massive deaths reported in western Bengal in 1769/70, when the drought, which lasted for six months, presumably forced the famine-vulnerable to starve for the same period. Many apparently also died in 1787/88, but there are no contemporary estimates to go by. One estimate however says that 152 households, out of a total number of 287 households in a village of Rangpur perished during the flood of 1787 and the famine which followed<sup>102</sup>. The question of famine mortality will be discussed shortly.

Famine and dearth prices thus provide an important insight into the nature of subsistence crises in a commercialized economy. Harvest failures were only proximate causes for triggering these events. Their real magnitude can be comprehended only by looking at them as severe dislocations in the food-market caused by sharp rise in prices. Subsistence was obviously now a function of an individual's purchasing power, and this fact must clearly indicate the virtual absence of "traditional" forms of subsistence "security".

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<sup>101</sup> Alamgir, 1980: 6; emphasis added.

<sup>102</sup> Estimate of D.H. MacDowall, collector of Rangpur in BRC, IOR P/51/45, 28 June 1789.

Famine, dearth and their social victims

How many, or what kind of people, did such shortages immediately affect? The people most severely affected during the famine of 1769/70 were said to be "the workmen, manufactures and people employed in the river [boatmen]", and this was so because they "were without the same means of laying by stores of grain as the husbandmen"<sup>103</sup>. The highest concentration of famine-deaths in 1769/70 were recorded amongst the rural artisans, the urban poor and among those who had migrated to the towns after being uprooted from their lands (presumably the poorer peasants). Contemporary descriptions suggest that nearly 50 percent of rural artisans perished in the worst affected districts<sup>104</sup>, and more than 500 uprooted migrants died daily in the city of Murshidabad during the peak of the famine<sup>105</sup>. That famine had caused unprecedented "distress to the poor" and threw-up "large numbers of deplorable objects [sic]" at the mercy of whatever relief was available in the towns<sup>106</sup>. The flood of 1786/87 took a heavy toll of the poorest in the villages. 7000 died and 12000 people were forced to migrate from Chittagong within a fortnight of August 1786<sup>107</sup>. As the water-level increased, even the *colla* lands became submerged<sup>108</sup> and the rural poor of southern Bengal "either wandered to Calcutta to receive support from the charity,

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<sup>103</sup> Memoir of Sir George Campbell, in J.C.Geddes, 1874: 18.

<sup>104</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol. 2, 5 December 1771; FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/4, 20 December 1771.

<sup>105</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Select Committee, vol. 4, proceedings of July 1770, p. 444.

<sup>106</sup> FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/1, 26 September 1770.

<sup>107</sup> WBSA, BRFW, vol. 3, part 2, 29 August 1786.

<sup>108</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/2, 20 September 1787; *ibid.*, P/50/67, 11 July 1787.



or went into other districts in hopes of employment, or simply resigned their lives"<sup>109</sup>. In eastern Bengal "great number of ryotts [cultivators] have been drowned by the inundations, and others being destitute of food for their support, and reduced to the greatest distress, have deserted from the districts"<sup>110</sup>.

A dearth did not occasion misery of similar magnitude as famines did. Nevertheless the first to be affected were invariably the "poor class of natives"<sup>111</sup> who comprised the "large proportion of the lower and most useful class of people"<sup>112</sup>. The essential problem during a dearth was not so much an absolute reduction in the quantity of food at the provincial level, but the severe food-availability decline at local levels which consequently raised the spot-prices of rice and paddy up to a point where the local poor were unable to purchase their subsistence. The tenuous balance between weather, output, prices and incomes meant that even the slightest variation in the first two variables (weather and output) immediately affected the state of prices, which, in turn, put severe strains on the income of producers. The reasons that they did not die in large numbers during dearth were mainly because of the short duration of such phenomenon and that food-supplies came in from the unaffected areas, albeit at high prices. But dearths were nevertheless serious crises of subsistence. The vulnerable sections of society were exposed to the problems of not having enough to eat despite their already

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., P/52/14, petition (*arzi*) of the *zamindars* of 24-Parganas regarding the impact of the flood of 1787, 7 July 1790.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., P/51/12, 4 September 1787.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., P/51/22, 15 August 1788.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., P/52/36, 21 October 1791.

low-levels of subsistence<sup>113</sup>. Almost invariably the producers complained that a dearth meant that "we cannot procure food even with money" though "there is grain in the hands of the merchants"<sup>114</sup>. Dearth meant that the producers were "at once bereft of present subsistence and future occupation" which left them with no choice but to "abandon their habitations to escape the horrors of a famine"<sup>115</sup>. It was this constriction in the availability of food under a dearth situation which explains why "the bulk of the people" at Rajshahi<sup>116</sup> in 1788 "have barely fed themselves and *not* with their usual food"<sup>117</sup>.

It is therefore possible to posit the existence of fairly numerous harvest-sensitive people in the province of Bengal whose very lives were at risk during famines and whose subsistence was jeopardized in a dearth. These people were obviously those who were "without the same means of laying by stores of grain as the husbandmen": people who suffered the greatest number of deaths during the famine of 1769/70. These were the artisans, poor peasants and

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<sup>113</sup> Francis Buchanan noted that the "common fare" of the poor of Rangpur consisted of "boiled rice, or other grain, which is seasoned with pot ashes and capsicum, and it is only that such persons can procure oil or fish" ["Ronggoppur", vol. 1, book 2, IOL, Mss. Eur. D. 74, f. 24]. The diet of the poor in Calcutta was equally indifferent, being composed of "...salt and a little oil, and one or two other prime necessities; though the vast multitudes... obtain only from day to day boiled rice, green pepper pods, and boiled herbs; the step above this is a little oil with rice. The lowest class often want betle and salt, and in place of the latter use the ashes of various plants containing different saline substances" [Mitra, 1951: 50].

<sup>114</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/47, *arzi* of producers of Burdwan, 30 August 1774.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., P/50/58, 22 April 1785. The reference is to the impact of the partial drought of 1783 in western Bengal.

<sup>116</sup> This district was described as the "heart of the rice country" of eastern Bengal in 1771 [WBSA, CCRM, vol. 2, 31 December 1770].

<sup>117</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/40, 25 April 1788; emphasis in text.

labourers who either possessed insufficient land or depended exclusively on the current harvest for their sustenance and did not have alternative or stored-up supplies of food. In the towns these were the labourers and the town-poor who depended entirely on the wages they could earn and whose existence was severely threatened by any reduction in food-supplies from centres of supply as any such contraction forced prices to spiral while their wages remained constant<sup>118</sup>, or even declined in real terms as for instance in the cases of textile producers<sup>119</sup> and salt manufacturers<sup>120</sup>.

Famine Mortality:some formulations regarding 1769/70 and 1788

Obviously the scale of the misery of these harvest-sensitive strata depended on the magnitude, measured in terms of the spatial and temporal spread, of these

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<sup>118</sup> See P.J.Marshall [1988: 28] for the connection between food-prices and wages among the coolies of eighteenth century Calcutta.

<sup>119</sup> See S.Bhattacharya,1983: 288.

<sup>120</sup> By the 1780s it was realized even among the Company's salt department that the workers involved in the manufacture of salt "formerly received greater wages than at present" since

The tuffalies (men who attend the fire) received for six months labour 12 rupees each now [receive] but seven.The koolaries (woodcutters) received 11 rupees,now [receive] but 6;the muzzoors [labourers] who collect the earth and fetch water received 9 & 10 rupees,at present [receive] only from 4 to 5 [rupees]

"Manufacture of Salt in Bengal,a Report Compiled by Messrs.Burrowes and Brookes",in BRC,IOR P/51/24,24 September 1788.

subsistence crises. Famines were occasions when a subsistence and mortality crisis came together in a critical conjuncture. This happened in 1769/70 and to a relatively lesser extent in 1788 as a carry-over from the massive floods of 1786/87. It is therefore pertinent to address the question of demographic crises caused by famines as it has a close bearing on the state of the agrarian order.

The most written about catastrophe in the history of eighteenth century Bengal is the famine of 1769-70, an event whose demographic consequences have almost become an orthodoxy in provincial historiography. Ever since Warren Hastings wrote about this aspect in 1772, subsequent most historians have accepted his estimate of 10 million deaths causing a decimation of one-third of the population without any questions<sup>121</sup>. Others who have questioned these mortality estimates have, nevertheless, left the issue unresolved owing to the paucity of evidence<sup>122</sup>.

There are numerous problems with the mortality figure of 10 million as deaths *during* the famine. First the peak intensity of the famine was located between the months of January and August 1770 when the highest concentration of deaths and desertion were reported from the most affected districts in western and north-eastern Bengal. In effect this gives us a peak mortality period of six months. Ten million deaths in the space of six months would make the case of Bengal unique in the history of global demographic catastrophes<sup>123</sup>. The implausibility of so many deaths

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<sup>121</sup> Sinha, 1968: 65; Chaudhury, 1983: 299-300.

<sup>122</sup> For instance, Marshall, 1987: 18.

<sup>123</sup> Even the Black Death, which is said to have decimated 25 million people of a total European population of 80 million, and destroyed 40 or 50 percent of England's population, raged for nearly three years on the continent after its initial visitation in May 1348. In England the Death seems to have been most severe in the eighteen months after May 1348. Moreover, these deaths were caused primarily by a pandemic (bubonic plague) on a scale which was never to be repeated on the European continent [Carlo M. (continued...)]

happening in so short a time becomes more apparent when it is remembered that the famine was not accompanied by a general epidemic. The only recorded case of an epidemic comes from Purnea, where in April 1770 we are told of the "Horror of Pestilence being added to those of Famine"<sup>124</sup>. It is interesting that a "great fever epidemic" (presumably malaria) was recorded in 1762 leading to the deaths of 50,000 people<sup>125</sup>, but no such descriptions exist for the 1769-70 situation<sup>126</sup>.

Second, there is an unresolved problem with the death toll itself. It tells us nothing about *excess mortality* during the famine. It is generally recognized that in practically all pre-modern societies there was a clear distinction, though often rendered tenuous, between normal and excess mortality. Normal mortality were regular deaths which occurred in the absence of a mortality crisis occasioned by war, famine or an epidemic. Excess mortality were the *additional* deaths caused in a crisis year and the case of pre-industrial Europe shows that these deaths could rise up to 6 or 10 percent over and above the "normal" deaths of roughly 3 percent a year<sup>127</sup>. The estimate of 10 million dead for Bengal in 1769-70 conceals the proportion between normal and excess deaths, though the scale of the crisis in that year would probably point to a fairly high

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<sup>123</sup>(...continued)  
Cipolla,1981: 160-61;M.M.Postan,1972: 41-42; Michael W.Flinn,1981: 51-52).

<sup>124</sup> SCC,IOR P/A/10,28 April 1770.

<sup>125</sup> Marshall,1987: 19.

<sup>126</sup> And the absence of a general epidemic in 1769-70 is all the more convincing because of the fact that a lot more documentation exists for the analysis of this famine than what is available for any of the previous ones.Surely an epidemic of provincial proportions would have been reported in the numerous,and graphic,descriptions of the misery caused by the famine which are contained in the sources.

<sup>127</sup> M.W.Flinn,1981: 15.

concentration in the latter category. Once again however one has to bear in mind that such a concentration would apply in the worst affected districts. Elsewhere the proportion between normal and excess mortality was much smaller precisely because the catastrophe was less severe in those parts.

The question is: how many people actually died during the course of the famine? All answers must remain provisional and absolutely tentative because of the paucity of quantitative data.

The descriptions contained in the sources suggest a famine misery on a calamitous scale. Deserted villages stretching over vast areas, large tracts of uncultivated land turning into jungles and abandoned homes both in the towns and in the villages -- these are some of the main features of the devastation in rural Bengal recorded by eye witnesses during and after the famine. Evidence available from nine villages "contiguous to Nattore" in Rajshahi suggests that these were reduced to 212 "dilapidated houses" in 1771 from 1267 households in 1769<sup>128</sup>. Rangpur suffered "a great scarcity of inhabitants"<sup>129</sup>. In Birbhum "many hundreds of villages are entirely depopulated & even in the large towns here are not a fourth part of the houses inhabited"<sup>130</sup>. Later inquiries revealed that Pachet and "northern parts of Burdwan suffered a great loss of inhabitants during the famine"<sup>131</sup>. The famine had taken a daily toll of "more than five hundred people" in the city of Murshidabad and "in the villages and country adjacent the numbers said to have perished exceed all belief"<sup>132</sup>.

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<sup>128</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol. 5, 11 May 1771.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., IOR G/27/1, 26 September 1770.

<sup>130</sup> FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/2, 22 February 1771.

<sup>131</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/50, 27 January 1775.

<sup>132</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Select Committee, vol. 4, proceedings of July 1770, p. 444.

By February 1770 it was feared that "one half of those who were about to pay revenues & cultivate the lands will unavoidably perish" in Purnea<sup>133</sup>. It was later estimated that one-half "the labouring and working people" had actually died in Purnea between 1769 and 1770<sup>134</sup>. The villages of Rajmahal were "for the most part totally abandoned [because] of a want of hands to follow the employment of tillage"<sup>135</sup>. The number of looms "employed in the Company's investment" at its factory in Malda "decreased during that calamity by near one half"<sup>136</sup>, and there was "a universal scarcity of Ryotts" in Hughli in the immediate aftermath of the famine<sup>137</sup>. What we cannot be sure is whether the descriptions given in the preceding paragraph refer to depopulation actually caused by fatalities or to desertion caused by the flight of peasants and artisans. The fact that the producers actually migrated during this event, and also during subsequent episodes of dearth and famine, is indicated in the sources, whose implications will be examined shortly.

Regarding deaths, the situation in Purnea and Murshidabad may perhaps permit the following reconstruction, keeping in mind that the peak period of famine devastation was a maximum of six months and that the worst affected were the six districts of western and north-eastern Bengal<sup>138</sup>. Purnea seems to have lost a total of 2,00,000 people during the course of the famine<sup>139</sup>. The estimate of 500 deaths per day in Murshidabad gives us a

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<sup>133</sup> SCC, IOR P/A/10, 16 February 1770.

<sup>134</sup> WBSA, Circuit at Purnea, 25 January 1773.

<sup>135</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol. 5, 31 May 1771.

<sup>136</sup> FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/4, 20 December 1771.

<sup>137</sup> CCR, IOR P/67/53, 20 May 1771.

<sup>138</sup> Those of Birbhum, Nadia, Murshidabad, Purnea, Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Rangpur.

<sup>139</sup> FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/1, 3 December 1770, p. 538.

total of 90,000 dead during the peak of famine mortality in that city. Even if we take the death-toll in Purnea as the representative figure of famine fatalities in the affected districts and apply that to the six districts which are described as having the highest rates of famine deaths, we get a figure of 1.2 million dead. It is perhaps reasonable to say that the famine of 1769-70 could at best have accounted for a ~~maximum~~ of 2 million deaths in the *entire* province of Bengal. This seems a fairly reasonable estimate because (i) south-western and south-eastern Bengal had practically no excess deaths and (ii) the famine had a clearly asymmetrical geographical sweep. The latter aspect has been discussed at various places in this chapter. The former point (that of the absence of excess deaths in south-eastern Bengal) is apparent from the figures regarding deaths and desertions in four contiguous villages of Rajshahi and Chittagong between 1769 and 1772 which are set out in Figure 15 (p. 108). This evidence further reinforces the point made in this chapter about the geographical asymmetry of the famine on 1769/70.

Nevertheless the depopulation in the districts most affected was enormous as contemporary estimates in the following districts show:

Purnea	50 percent
Birbhum	25 percent
Rajshahi	33 to 50 percent
Malda	50 percent <sup>140</sup>

There is therefore some justification in the statements of Sinha and Chaudhuri that the famine caused unprecedented mortality; but these deaths were limited only to the worst affected districts. The previously accepted estimate of 10 million deaths now appears a largely

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<sup>140</sup> This estimate pertains only to the loss suffered by the artisanal population under the Company's manufactories (*aurangs*).



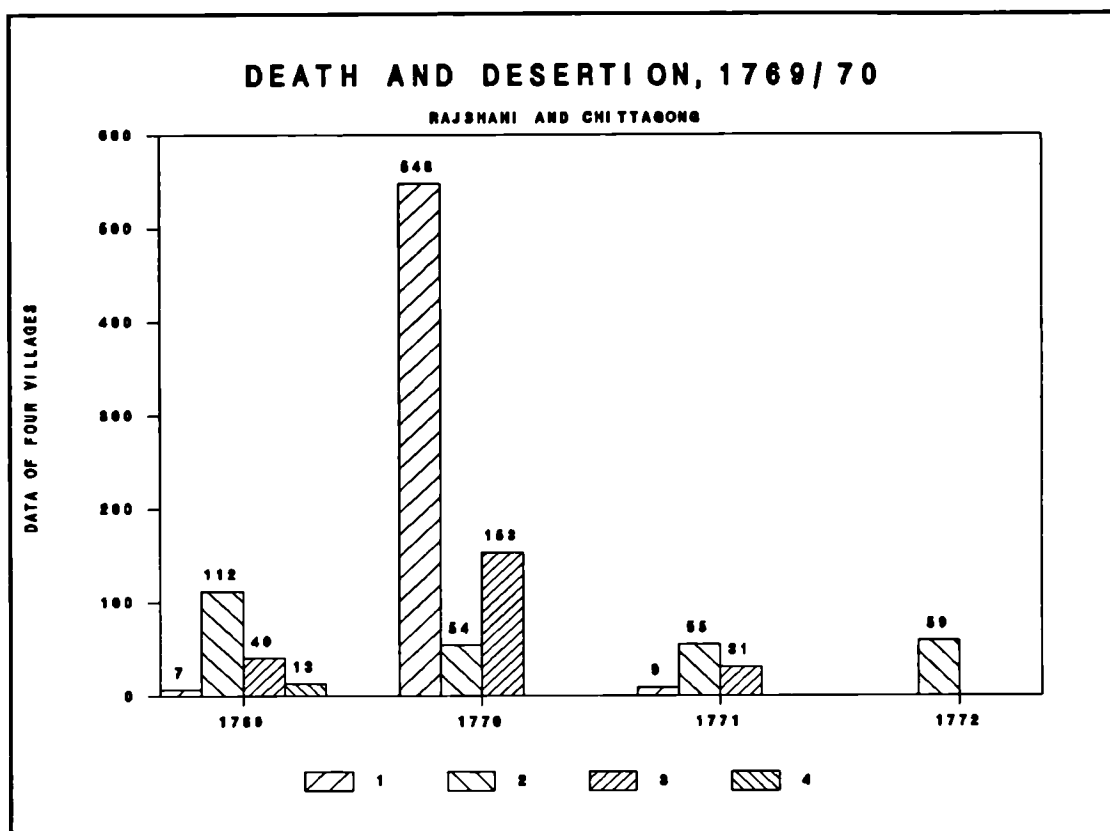


FIGURE 15

Legend: 1:Deaths Rajshahi; 2:Deaths Chittagong; 3: Desertions Rajshahi; 4:Desertions Chittagong.

Source: Brit. Mus., Add. Ms., 29076, f.140; *BDR, Chittagong, vol. 1, no.202.*

inflated number. Nevertheless two million dead in the space of six or seven months still remains a very high number of famine deaths, and must therefore substantiate the definition, in this discussion, of a famine as subsistence and mortality crisis in a critical conjuncture.

The death-toll during the flood-induced famine of 1788 is less detailed though one still gets the distinct impression that it was quite high in eastern Bengal. 7000

people died in Chittagong in a fortnight in August 1786<sup>141</sup>. Massive deaths were reported from practically all over Bengal. At Burdwan "almost every house in the town and every village contiguous to it fell down" by the onslaught of the flood waters and "large number of people died and a prodigious quantity of cattle destroyed"<sup>142</sup>. The flood and the havoc it caused to the standing crops had killed a "great number of ryotts" in Rangpur while the survivors had been rendered "destitute of food for their support"<sup>143</sup>. Dhaka also suffered large-scale mortality and desertion by the surviving rural population<sup>144</sup>. The district of the 24-Parganas, which had largely escaped from the devastating drought of 1769/70<sup>145</sup>, seems to have been rudely shaken by the flood. Here the problem caused by the flood was aggravated by an outbreak of small-pox causing multitudes of people to "resign their lives"<sup>146</sup>. The crisis in north Bengal (Malda, Rangpur and Dinajpur) was compounded by a change in the course of the Teesta river in the 1780s. The Teesta deserted its previous course and "now [1788] runs through... an infinite variety of different streams, many of which are entirely new, & have been formed by the water penetrating thro' the cultivated fields; whilst others which before were insignificant Nullahs [streams] have from the above event become considerable rivers"<sup>147</sup>. When the flood struck it damaged lives, livestock and property to such an extent that "there does not remain a vestige of the Ryotts houses nor even a mark of the places where they had

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<sup>141</sup> WBSA, BRFW, vol.3, part 2, 29 August 1786.

<sup>142</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/13, 25 October 1787.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., P/51/12, 4 September 1787.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., P/51/51, 9 December 1789.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., P/49/52, 7 April 1775.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., P/52/14, 7 July 1790.

<sup>147</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/47, *arzi* of *zamindars* of Rangpur to D.H. MacDowall the collector, 25 June 1788.

formerly been"<sup>148</sup>. Flood-waters destroyed standing crops in Purnea and Nadia and caused peasants to flee from their lands, but there were relatively fewer deaths in these places<sup>149</sup>, which indicates the lesser severity of the subsistence crisis in western Bengal.

Worst conditions were still to follow in eastern Bengal. The first wave of mortality was caused by people drowning during the course of the floods in August-September 1787 and then by the cyclone which struck immediately afterwards. But it was the famine in the east, which lasted during the major part of 1788, which caused the greatest misery. Between 37.5 and 50 percent of the standing crops were destroyed in 1787 and the harvests of 1788 were affected because the lands had soaked up moisture in excess of what was considered good for proper cultivation and so could not be ploughed<sup>150</sup>. Like the previous famine in 1769/70, supplies of food were reduced among the harvest sensitive strata of the population, prices rose sharply and remained so "for a period of above eight months" in 1788<sup>151</sup>. Starvation deaths were reported from all over Bengal, "many destitute and miserable" looking for some form of relief entered the "skirts of the town" of Calcutta, thereby causing a disruption in the supplies of rice there<sup>152</sup>, and the general debilitation of the people elsewhere was "too lamentable a proof of the excessive dearness of the provisions in the distressed situation of the inhabitants, who sell their children to

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<sup>148</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/12, 4 September 1787.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., P/51/12, 20 September 1787 and 16 October 1787.

<sup>150</sup> "Remarks on the Several Collectorships in Bengal in the years 1788 and 1789", IOR Home Misc., vol. 385, p. 68.

<sup>151</sup> John Haldane, Robert Kennaway, Charles Grant and John Bristow, "Report Of The Commercial Occurrences of 1788", in IOR Home Misc., vol. 393, p. 113.

<sup>152</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/25, 1 October 1788.

enable them to purchase a few meals to prolong their miserable existence"<sup>153</sup>. The surviving population:

Are greatly reduced in bodily strength from want of food, and have neither cattle nor other effects. The few who have anything left cannot cultivate their old possessions for want of seed and enhanced price of cattle; hence much of the old cultivated lands are lying fallow... <sup>154</sup>.

Unfortunately we are not in a position to account for the number of people who actually died during the flood of 1786/87 and the famine which followed. Some evidence from Jessore and Dhaka suggests that this catastrophe had resulted in as much as 75 percent of the cultivated land in some *parganas* falling out of cultivation as "many of the Ryotts are dead from the famine that has prevailed the whole year while others have left their habitations and gone to other parts of the country"<sup>155</sup>. Another estimate of a village in Rangpur tells us that 152 out of a total number of 287 households (recorded in 1786) perished during the flood of 1787 and the famine which followed<sup>156</sup>. What we cannot be sure is whether the estimates of lands falling into decay were caused by the physical decimation of the producers or by the temporary out-migration of a harassed peasantry and artisans under extremely trying circumstances. There is a strong possibility that both may have occurred, though the proportion of one to the other must remain an enigma. Moreover, the fact that the famine (which followed the flood and cyclone of 1786/87) was concentrated primarily in eastern and south-western Bengal must (like

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<sup>153</sup> IOR Home Misc., vol.393, pp.113-114, 120.

<sup>154</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/29, 22 December 1788.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., P/51/29, 22 December 1788 for Dhaka, and *ibid.*, P/51/22, 25 June 1788 for Jessore.

<sup>156</sup> Estimate of D.H. MacDowall, collector of Rangpur in BRC, IOR P/51/45, 28 June 1789.

the famine of 1769/70) point to a spatial asymmetry in the crisis of mortality; but the paucity of evidence compels the issue of deaths during 1787/88 to be left wide open.

### Famine, dearth and migration

The preceding sections have perhaps indicated that people migrated from their established bases of production during famines, or even dearths. Migration has historically been one of the most important strategies of survival adopted by the famine-stricken<sup>157</sup>. In 1769/70 the producers did desert in large numbers as "under this hardship, to forsake his [the producer's] profession and country has been the easiest and speediest means of relief"<sup>158</sup>, which must indirectly reflect the fact that the such people actually viewed migration as a strategy of survival under crises.

There is some indication in our sources that migration for survival indeed happened in Bengal during 1769/70. Around 1770 Dhaka division was described as having a "remarkably luxuriant" soil but thinly populated owing to its "low situation"; floods were a problem in a topography of this type but droughts were relatively unknown, these being "pernicious only to the crops of the upper or northern pergunnahts"<sup>159</sup>. Circumstantial evidence indicates that the famine of 1770 saw a movement of people from the west to the east as by 1775 "the Balance of trade is in favour of this province [as] its southern districts furnish

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<sup>157</sup> Arnold, 1988: 91 ff.

<sup>158</sup> IOR Home Misc., vol. 206, p. 205

<sup>159</sup> IOR Home Misc., vol. 206, p. 212-13.

the greatest supplies of grain to the presidency"<sup>160</sup>. Midnapur certainly received large numbers of uprooted migrants from Burdwan, Birbhum and "other parts of Bengal" who came "in a very starving condition in hopes of finding the scarcity less here than in their own country"; many travelled to Orissa<sup>161</sup>. The district of the 24-Parganas was not only free from the demographic consequences of the famine, it also received an influx of peasants and artisans from other districts which explains its relative prosperity during the height of the famine and later<sup>162</sup>. Sinha states that Rangpur "gained an accession of population by the calamity"<sup>163</sup> but this is in the teeth of overwhelmingly contradictory evidence which is available to show a substantial depopulation in that district by *flight* of the peasantry even though actual deaths here were relatively insignificant<sup>164</sup>.

Both the facts, that able-bodied peasants survived the famine and that they migrated in large numbers, are also supported by the statements of peasants being asked to return to their abandoned homesteads by various *zamindars*<sup>165</sup>, by the reports of a fairly rapid reclamation of deserted (*palataka*) land, even in a badly affected district like Birbhum after 1771<sup>166</sup> and by the accounts of petty-landholders (*talluqdars*) in Rangpur "enticing the ryotts from other parts" to settle in their lands on

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<sup>160</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/52, 7 April 1775.

<sup>161</sup> J.C. Price, 1876: 82.

<sup>162</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/52, 7 April 1775.

<sup>163</sup> Sinha, 1968: 54.

<sup>164</sup> See WBSA, LCB, vol. 1, 20 August 1770; FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/1, 26 September 1770.

<sup>165</sup> WBSA, CCR, vol. 1, 20 May 1771.

<sup>166</sup> For estimates of lands under cultivation in different *parganas* of Birbhum after the famine see BRC, IOR P/49/42, 25 October 1773, and *ibid.*, P/49/47, 23 April 1774.

concessional terms of revenue<sup>167</sup>. By 1773, those who had fled from their lands in Purnea had started to return "to their fields, except a few who have no calling" who had chosen to remain in Murshidabad "to seek employment"<sup>168</sup>. Thus the famine of 1769/70 appears to have caused a cross-migration of people from north and west Bengal to the districts situated to the south-west and the south-east.

The famine in 1787/88 saw another large-scale movement of the uprooted all over southern-western, south-eastern and northern Bengal from those places which had been worst affected by the floods and the cyclone. The first reaction of the afflicted was to move to higher grounds and wait for the flood-waters to subside. Thus in Burdwan, where the rivers Damodar and Ajoy breached embankments, "nothing but the banks of tanks remained for the reception of every living animal"<sup>169</sup>; and in Rangpur, villagers fled to "high spots of land, and lived with those, whose houses were above the reaches of the waters", others "took up their abodes on trees and so saved their lives"<sup>170</sup>. But the waters did not recede and the cyclone in the east added to their problems. Thus began the long, and debilitating, process of out-migration as the survivors were forced to "quit their habitations and [go] to other parts of the country"<sup>171</sup>.

Where precisely were these "other parts"? There is some evidence to show that some people moved to the district headquarters in the hope of some relief<sup>172</sup>. The

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<sup>167</sup> *BDR, Rangpur*, vol.1, no.5, 23 June 1770.

<sup>168</sup> *WBSA, Circuit at Purnea*, 2 February to 9 February 1773, p.43.

<sup>169</sup> *BRC, IOR P/51/13*, 25 October 1787.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, *P/51/12*, 4 September 1787.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, *P/51/29*, 22 December 1788.

<sup>172</sup> See *Ibid.*, *P/51/12*, 4 September 1787 for such migrations in Rangpur; *ibid.*, *P/51/13*, 9 October 1787 for the  
(continued...)

uprooted from the district of 24-Parganas moved in large numbers to Calcutta "in hopes of employment"<sup>173</sup>. Migrants from Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Rangpur also entered the town of Murshidabad, thereby causing immense strains on the stocks of food already under pressure and forcing a further escalation of price<sup>174</sup>. An unspecified number of people of Burdwan, in south-western Bengal, who seem to have been displaced by the floods of 1787 (though not to the same extent or numbers as the people in the east) were nevertheless forced to move to districts situated further westward (for instance to Birbhum and Bishnupur) where the floods had caused practically no damage and where grain, and presumably work, was available<sup>175</sup>. Cultivators from Rajshahi also trekked to Birbhum, where they were able to acquire land for cultivation as non-resident (*pahi-kashta*) peasants<sup>176</sup>. Some inter-district migration seems to have occurred in eastern Bengal too, where people moved from the worst affected areas to those which were somewhat better situated, though the difference between better and worst was only a matter of degree given the massive problems

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<sup>172</sup>(...continued)  
situation in Burdwan;and *ibid.*,P/51/20,18 April 1788 for Rajshahi.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*,P/52/14,7 July 1790.

<sup>174</sup> BRP,IOR P/70/40,1 April 1788.

<sup>175</sup> BRC,IOR P/51/21,4 June 1788.Interestingly the flight of peasants from Burdwan to Birbhum became a source of friction between the *zamindars* of these two districts.The *zamindar* of Burdwan subsequently demanded the return of these cultivators on grounds that they were the settled resident-cultivators (*khud-kashta raiyat*) of his *zamindari* and were therefore obliged to cultivate land and pay revenue in Burdwan.The counter-claim proffered by the *zamindar* of Birbhum was that these migrants had acquired the legal status of non-resident peasants (*pahi-kashta raiyat*) in his lands,and were therefore entitled to stay and cultivate land in his *zamindari* [see *Ibid.*,P/51/34,8 April 1789].

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*,P/52/2,part 1,10 February 1790.



caused by floods and cyclone all over eastern Bengal in 1787. Thus people from Tipperah and Sylhet, where large-scale devastation had taken place<sup>177</sup>, appear to have moved to Mymensing where crops had only been partially damaged<sup>178</sup>. In Dhaka, the uprooted "deserted their old habitations, and [have] gone to different places; and many are in the city of Dacca, [others] to Gunges [large market towns], Golahs [granaries] &c. begging their bread with sighs and tears"<sup>179</sup>.

Even cases of dearth could cause a temporary out-migration of people so affected. Thus the partial drought in 1773/74 caused the cultivators to desert. In Birbhum such desertions had reduced the number of cultivators in some *parganas* "upwards of a third & in many places a much larger proportion"<sup>180</sup>. Similar flights were reported in 1784 when Tippera was apparently flooded; an estimated 12000 "souls have left this country" since "the labour of the cultivators was totally lost and the calamities of famine succeeded their disappointment"<sup>181</sup>. Dhaka district also suffered a flood in 1784, "causing a real and great scarcity of Grain"<sup>182</sup>; some *parganas* were almost entirely washed away "by the inundation from the northern mountains", forcing the producers to leave their habitations; in *pargana* Dawoodpur "there are only 11 Families remaining... and these from the difficulty in

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<sup>177</sup> For the flood induced havoc in Tipperah and Sylhet see WBSA,BRFW,vol.3,part 2,29 August 1786 and BRC,IOR P/50/67,11 July 1786 respectively.

<sup>178</sup> BRC,IOR P/51/19,18 April 1788.

<sup>179</sup> BRC,IOR P/51/29,22 December 1788.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.,P/49/46,21 June 1774.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.,P/50/59,1 July 1785.It was the fear of a famine,rather than the fact of famine,which seems to have forced people to move out of this district in 1784.

<sup>182</sup> *Bangladesh Districts Records*,vol.1,Dacca,no.25,p.77.

procuring provisions and the enhanced [sic] price of these are in the greatest distress"<sup>183</sup>. The Damodar river flooded Burdwan twice more after 1787, in 1791 and 1794, causing extensive damage to crops, cattle and houses<sup>184</sup>. 1791 was also a year when Midnapur was visited by another flood which destroyed between 31 percent and 37.5 percent ("between five-sixteenths and six-sixteenths of the total") of the standing crop, caused a dearth-like situation and forced peasants to flee their lands<sup>185</sup>. In 1791, 1005 out of a total of 8049 peasant households in Mymensing were said to have "deserted their lands & taken refuge elsewhere"<sup>186</sup>. In 1794, the peasants in some *parganas* of Nadia "have deserted owing to the water overflowing their lands"<sup>187</sup>.

It must however be pointed out that the extent, direction and nature of such migration differed in accordance to the magnitude of the subsistence-crisis. Famines were occasions when the displaced were forced to migrate over long distances in search of survival. The most obvious places were the towns. Large numbers migrated to the town of Murshidabad during the famine of 1769/70 and to Calcutta during the famine of 1788. Those who survived such arduous journeys under conditions of abject debilitation

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., no.42, 4 October 1794, p.95.

<sup>184</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/36, 7 October 1791, and *ibid.*, P/53/21, 30 September 1793.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., P/53/36, 21 October 1791. While floods destroyed crops in places like Burdwan and Midnapur, 1791 was a year of an apparently severe drought in 24-Parganas. "I am sorry" wrote Edward Colebrooke collector Calcutta Cutcherry (*kachahri*) "to be obliged to report to you [Board of Revenue] that the Rice crops have totally failed in the extensive Plains from Bernagore to Russapugla [where] whole maaths [fields] of many thousand Begas [1 *bigha* = 0.33 acres approximately] are totally destroyed by the droughts" [BRP, IOR P/71/45, 15 November 1791].

<sup>186</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/42, 1 August 1791.

<sup>187</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/30, 30 May 1794.

returned to their villages once a semblance of normality reappeared, but there were also those (said to have "no calling") who stayed back "to seek employment"<sup>188</sup>. The proportion between those who returned and those who stayed back is unclear, because of the paucity of information. P.J.Marshall suggests a high rate of return to land in the late eighteenth century for two reasons (i) even the poorest migrants had tiny plots of land in the village to which they naturally reverted and (ii) prices of food were generally lower in the countryside than in towns<sup>189</sup>. Moreover, given the low potential of towns in the eighteenth century (including Calcutta) to absorb surplus labour, the possibilities of long-term productive employment for such people, on wages high enough to beat the higher costs of living in towns appears largely improbable. Famines therefore were occurrences when migrations caused a re-distribution of population *within* the countryside in the midst of a severe crisis of subsistence and of mortality.

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<sup>188</sup> WBSA, Circuit at Purnea, p.43.

<sup>189</sup> Marshall, 1988: 33-35.

### Chapter 3

#### **The Structure of Landed Property: *Zamindars, Taluqdars and La-kharaji* Holders**

One of the central concerns of the East India Company after 1765 was to comprehend the structure of landed property in Bengal. This task was understandably enormous as it entailed sifting through the often confusing welter of rights and perquisites over land and its produce which constituted the core of such property. The fact that revenue-collecting structures and property-rights were combined almost inseparably added to the confusion of the early Company administrators, who were also under immense pressures to formulate a workable revenue regime after the initially disastrous revenue experiments and the famine of 1769/70. Naturally opinions differed, and the question of landed property became the source of one of the most enduring, and acrimonious, debates of that time.

The aim of this chapter is to establish the contours of the various rights and privileges which jointly constituted the structure of landed property in late eighteenth century Bengal. Another objective is to point to some imbalances which exist in Bengal's historiography. While the nature and organization of the *zamindari* system have been subjected to detailed scrutiny<sup>1</sup>, there are no definite studies of the other elements which comprised these proprietors: *taluqdars* and holders of *la-kharaj* (revenue-free) lands have not been properly analyzed. What exist are essentially short notices to describe these

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<sup>1</sup> See Shirin Akhtar, 1972; Ratnalekha Ray, 1979: chapter 1.

rights just before the Permanent Settlement<sup>2</sup> which do not tell us anything either of their evolution or of their roles in rural society. The other historical concern has been to see the *zamindari* in Bengal in relation to the revenue policies of the East India Company in order to highlight the disastrous consequences which such practices had upon them. Extant discussions have therefore focussed upon this aspect from the point of revenue administration and not from the social position of the *zamindari* in the context of rural stratification or their economic role in the processes of agricultural production. A nuanced analysis of the positions and roles of the *talluqdars* and the revenue-free land-holders in rural society and economy is also virtually non-existent. The subsequent discussion will endeavour to redress these imbalances by focussing attention on the close intermeshing of landed property with the agricultural economy and social stratification. Special emphasis will be placed on reconstructing the nature of the *talluqdari* and *la-kharaji* property-rights in order to attempt a more cogent analysis of the complex nature of landed property in Bengal.

The landed proprietors in eighteenth century Bengal were those who enjoyed an intrinsically superior status in rural society by virtue of the lands personally held by them and by the power vested in them by the state to collect revenue, a part of which they themselves retained. As will be discussed subsequently, these financial perquisites comprised the major proportion of their income which were supplemented by the sale of produce from their personal lands in markets, which were often established by them (see chapter 1). Therefore, what these proprietors owned were assets, both moveable or fixed, which could be used to provide them with an income, or, if necessary, could be sold for a lump sum. The latter occurred when these proprietors sold their rights of taxation and their

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<sup>2</sup> See Sinha, 1968; Islam, 1979.

personal lands, and the Company's testimony indicates that such sales had increased substantially after 1765<sup>3</sup>. They also possessed the right to claim shares in the economic output, i.e., over the *surplus* produced by the peasant or the artisan<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless, not all landed proprietors had the right to levy or collect taxes on behalf of the state. Our sources indicate the widespread existence of a social category who held fairly extensive lands called the *la-kharaji* or *baz-i-zamin*. These lands were donated by other landed proprietors or the state on a permanent and hereditary basis. These lands were free of all revenue assessments, thus providing the incumbents with a secure, and often lucrative, source of monetary income. Additionally such lands were often sold, thereby making them a distinct form of landed property.

#### The *zamindari* in Bengal: a brief overview

A *zamindar*, stated the Amini Report in 1778:

Whatsoever right his tenure or office may convey is the Superior of a District of which, unless his authority is suspended, he collects the Rent, and

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<sup>3</sup> "Purchasers of zemindarry land are become very numerous since the acquisition of the Dewanny" wrote Cornwallis about the pace of such sales [BRP, IOR P/70/23, 18 January 1787].

<sup>4</sup> The right to a share of the produce and possibly over labour are the criteria Irfan Habib has used to define landed-property in Mughal India (Habib: 1965). My definition differs from Habib's in so far as I see such rights as existing in *addition* to the *ownership* of material assets, both in land and money.

for which he pays a Revenue to Government. He is the First in point amongst the several Landholders<sup>5</sup>.

The superiority of the *zamindari* was partly because of the factor of caste. Most *zamindars* were Kayasthas, Brahmins and Kshatriyas; but caste alone is inadequate in explaining the social prestige of the *zamindars*. So-called "lower caste" Kaivarta, Bagdi, Tili and Sadgop *zamindaris* co-existed, and expanded, during the course of the century<sup>6</sup>. A trading caste (Khatri) from northern India was able to establish the Burdwan Raj, one of the largest of the eighteenth century *zamindari's*<sup>7</sup>, while that of Birbhum belonged to a Muslim family who founded the *zamindari* by dispossessing the previous Rajput family some time in the late seventeenth century<sup>8</sup>. In general the larger *zamindaris* belonged to the upper-caste Hindus, while the smaller ones were in the hands of the lower castes. With the exception of the Pathan family of Birbhum, most Muslim *zamindaris* were of a much smaller scale<sup>9</sup>.

The suggestion that the term *zamindar* in pre-British Bengal denoted a revenue collector and incorporated the semi-independent potentates (including the *bara bhuiyas*) who had usurped large territories during the period of transition from Afghan to Mughal rule<sup>10</sup> provides only a partial explanation of the formation and expansion of such rights in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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<sup>5</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 206, p. 344.

<sup>6</sup> S. Akhtar, 1982: 23; also H. Sanyal, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> IOR, BRC P/50/66, 7 April 1786.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., P/50/11, 21 July 1778.

<sup>9</sup> IOR, BRC P/50/63, 11 February 1786; *ibid.*, P/51/25, 1 October 1788; *ibid.*, P/52/2, 10 February 1790.

<sup>10</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri, 1969: 63.

Usurpation of territories was only *one* of the many ways in which these landed-properties evolved. The history of some of the larger *zamindaris* compiled by the Company in the 1780s shows that collaboration with the state in matters pertaining to revenue settlements or the subjugation of local rebellions provided the initial opening into the world of territorial acquisitions<sup>11</sup>. It is perhaps significant that lands usurped by individuals and later added to their *zamindaris* by payments of *nazrana* (gifts) to the state were in theory only to be held as long as the state willed; they could be resumed if a rightful heir could make a just claim<sup>12</sup>. Therefore neither usurpation nor collaboration are adequate enough to explain the establishment of an elaborate system of landed property encapsulated under the generic term *zamindari*, a form of property which came to prevail all over the province in a variety of sizes.

The assertion that the *zamindars* were essentially revenue-administrators who had no control over land or its operation, and who had virtually no role in agricultural production<sup>13</sup> is difficult to sustain, at least for the eighteenth century. There is evidence (discussed below) to show that their participation in agricultural production was closer than what has been proposed by historians. Moreover, the manner in which such properties were formed does show a fairly close connection with the agricultural economy, particularly with the extension of cultivated land: a point which needs elucidation.

According to *Rai-Rayan Rajvallabh*:

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<sup>11</sup> John Shore's Minute of 2 April 1788 in BRC, IOR P/51/28; *ibid.*, P/51/66, 7 April 1786; also FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/1, 16 October 1770.

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Reza Khan to Board, WBSA, Miscellaneous Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, vol. 1, 1772-1776, pp. 338-39.

<sup>13</sup> Ray and Ray, 1977.



Zemindarries are of various kinds, some are obtained by inheritance, some by clearing the country of wood, some by the ejection of the possessor for ill-behaviour, some by purchase and some in trust<sup>14</sup>.

This description, though rather cryptic, does indicate that the formation of *zamindaris* in Mughal and Nawabi Bengal was by a combination of state action and individual initiative. One of the earliest English writers to focus on this combination was Boughton-Rouse who, in 1791, saw the origins of *milkiyat* (right of property) in Bengal in three sources: (a) *jangal-bari* (clearance of waste-land for cultivation), (b) *inteqali* (transfer of right) and (c) *a-hukami* (by order of authority). *A-hukami* operated when the state removed a *zamindar* and settled another in his place; but the other two sources clearly indicate the connection between agricultural reclamation and the creation of *zamindari*. *Jangal-bari* referred to those *zamindaris* created by reclaiming land for the first time, whereas *inteqali* occurred where:

The land is in a good state of cultivation, and productive to the amount of revenue; yet, on account of the neglect of the incumbent, or for want of heirs to the land, another person has with the permission of the Emperor, or the Government delegated by him, obtained a sunnud [order] for his office in his own name<sup>15</sup>

Muhammad Reza Khan also made a clear distinction between *zamindaris* created by *jangal-bari* or purchase

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<sup>14</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/18, 2 April 1788.

<sup>15</sup> *Dissertation Concerning the Landed Property in Bengal*, London, 1791, IOL, *Tracts*, vol. 168, p. 57, [hereafter, *Dissertation*].

(*kharida*), and those who had been established by the state whom he called the *sanadi zamindars*. Included in these *sanadi zamindars* were also people who had been empowered by the ruler to bring spots of waste land into cultivation. These were not *jangal-bari zamindars* in the strict sense, but functioned on a similar footing. He further added that the relationship between the state and the *zamindar* varied according to the specific nature of each one's origin. *Jangal-bari* and *kharida zamindars* enjoyed permanent and inviolable rights of property, and the state had no further right "other than receiving rents". *Sanadi zamindars* were subject to closer state control; some of them were more in the nature of temporary offices to be bestowed, and revoked, by the rulers at their discretion<sup>16</sup>. These descriptions by experienced revenue officials and John Shore's opinion (in 1788) that "most of the considerable zemindars in Bengal may be traced within the last century and a half" and that "the extent of their jurisdictions has been considerably augmented during the time of Jaffier [Murshid Quli] Khan and since" through a mixed process of "purchases, acquisitions and confiscations"<sup>17</sup> indicate that a *zamindari* in pre-British Bengal could emerge from a number of directions, not all of them were related to the will of the state. What appears crucial is the creation of *zamindaris* from below when individuals became *zamindars* either by reclaiming or by purchasing land: in the former case what obviously occurred was the extension of agricultural land and in the latter situation one can perhaps speak of the creation of an extensive land-market in the province.

These *zamindars* from below constituted, what James Grant called, "small, or single pergunnah zemindarries [in] districts and petty mahls, dispersed throughout

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<sup>16</sup> WBSA, Miscellaneous Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, volume 1, 1772-1776, p.350.

<sup>17</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/18, 2 April 1788.

Bengal" whose numbers had "so prodigiously increased" since the administration of Murshid Quli Khan, and whose composition was constantly changing "in denomination, extent or possessory rights [so] as to become now [in 1789] a work of considerable labour to trace their revolutionary [sic] progress"<sup>18</sup>. A reason for this growth appears to lie in the concessions given by the state to such proprietors to manage their internal affairs with very little interference.

One of the most important devices of political intervention adopted by the Mughals was that the *zamindars* were obliged to acquire the state's sanction in cases of inheritance and alienation of the *zamindari* by division or sale. These sanctions were apparently strictly enforced in the case of the "superior zemindars" (such as those of Burdwan, Nadia, Rajshahi and Dinajpur), who, in case of inheritance or succession, were "accustomed to receive on payment of nuzerranah, paishkash & ca. a Dewanny Sunnud from Government", whereas "the zemindars of a middle and inferior rank... and the talookdars... at large have held their lands to this day by virtue of inheritance alone"<sup>19</sup>. Such non-interference allowed the evolution of a whole range of such *zamindaris*. Some, like the *chaudhuris*, of Jalasor sub-divided the *pargana* into a number of portions by a process of internal fragmentation. Each *chaudhuri* enjoyed a share in the *rasum* (perquisites) allowed to the landed proprietors and managed the affairs, including the payment of revenue, in their separate portions<sup>20</sup>. Others, like the ones in Jalalpur (in eastern Bengal) held *zamindaris* which were "not contiguous to each other but intersected and divided by other districts"; though the

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<sup>18</sup> FR 2, pp.199-200.

<sup>19</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/18, 2 April 1788, reply of Rai Rayan Rajvallabh to Council, 2 April 1788.

<sup>20</sup> IOR, Committee of New Lands, P/98/10, 26 July 1761.

state realized that such "separation makes it extremely difficult for one man to superintend the collection of the whole [revenue]"<sup>21</sup>, there was very little done to prevent such spatially dispersed rights from developing in pre-British Bengal.

The *zamindari* was the dominant form of landed property, but as a social organization it was remarkably stratified. At the apex were those who were, in the parlance of the East India Company, the "principal" or "capital" *zamindars*. These were the *zamindars* who had been able to carve out near-principalities and ruled over extensive territories. Positioned below them in the social hierarchy were the smaller *zamindars* with territorial jurisdictions over a few *parganas* and even over a few villages. Districts such as Midnapur and Chittagong had between 1500 and 3000 *zamindars* in the 1780s<sup>22</sup>. This stratification notwithstanding, the *zamindars* were the most powerful social class in the countryside, and also the most affluent. This affluence arose from their rights to tax and, as I will discuss, from their participation in agricultural production, which made these people much more than mere state functionaries. They also had a privileged social standing based on a combination of caste, prescriptive status and local power. In fact the social prestige of a *zamindar* in Bengal was measured by an inseparable mix of territorial jurisdiction, amount of the assessed revenue (*jama*) and by the extent of patronage which an individual *zamindar* could provide to the local temples, mosques and other religious orders who sought his

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<sup>21</sup> IOR, BRC, P/51/51, 9 December 1789.

<sup>22</sup> Sinha, 1968: 165. Even single *parganas* could have up to 300 *zamindars* paying revenue ranging from 25000 to 50 rupees [WBSA, PCR: Murshidabad, vol. 12, 5 May 1777].

help<sup>23</sup>. This latter function not only bestowed upon these *zamindars* a great degree of local prestige and power, it also allowed the formation of another kind of landed property, the *la-kharaji*, whose nature and social implications will be discussed subsequently.

The *talluqdari*: evolution and nature in the eighteenth century

Positioned below the *zamindars* in the hierarchy of landed property were the *talluqdars*. In the revenue terminology of the eighteenth century, a *talluqdar*, in the words of John Shore, "literally means a holder or possessor of a dependency"<sup>24</sup> of two major types: the *huzuri* (or *has*) and *mazkuri*. The *huzuri talluqdars* held their rights under, and paid revenue, directly to the state, whereas the *mazkuri* "hold their tenures under a zemindar or chaudhuri to whom they pay their rents"<sup>25</sup>. In the complex network of landed-rights the *talluqdar* was recognized as one specific form, but ascribed an inferior social position relative to the *zamindari*. Its recognition as a specific landed property is in evidence from Muhammad Reza Khan's statement that both in *zamindari* and *talluqdari* "laws of inheritance, property, sale, purchase and donation have been observed in this country from the dawn of civilization"; but on the

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<sup>23</sup> See J.Harrington to Board, BRP, IOR P/71/36, 4 February 1791; T.Henckell to Council, BRC, IOR P/52/20, 27 Oct. 1790; L.Mercer to Council, BRC, IOR P/52/30; Amini Report, IOR, Home Misc., vol. 206, p. 346.

<sup>24</sup> FR 2, p. 749.

<sup>25</sup> Brit. Mus., Add. Ms. 29086; IOR Home Misc., vol. 206, p. 345; also *Risala-i-Zira'at*, IOR Home Misc., vol. 68, p. 732-33.

other hand, its relatively inferior status can also be seen from his note that "a big zemindar is called a Raja, while petty zemindars are called zemindars and chaudhuris [and] in a zemindarri there are several talookdars"<sup>26</sup>. Reza Khan's description is also corroborated by the one provided by *Rai Rayan Rajvallabh* for whom *talluqdars*:

In regard to the rights of property and inheritance are the same [as the *zamindars*], but there is a difference [between the two] in point of revenues, dignities & privileges arising from a difference in extent of territory"<sup>27</sup>.

In general, a *talluqdar* was recognized as "inferior in rank and title" to the *zamindar*. Nevertheless it was a distinct form of property and the proprietors possessed "their little territories on a tenure full as secure [as the *zamindari*], and at a revenue generally more fixed"<sup>28</sup>.

*Talluqdari* differed from the *zamindari* on four specific aspects. First, as has been noted, there was the basic difference between social standing of these rights: the *zamindari* being considered the superior right and the *talluqdari* the subordinate one. Second, the act of *zamindari* lay in the payment of revenue (*malguzari*) to the state which included the payment of *talluqdari* revenue within their jurisdictions. In other words, a *zamindar* was at the *khidmat* of the state, whereas the *talluqdar* had no such service obligation<sup>29</sup>. Even *huzuri talluqas*, which in theory were entitled to pay directly to the state, were

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<sup>26</sup> *CPC*, vol. 8, 1788-89, Delhi, 1953, 2 February 1788, p. 420.

<sup>27</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/18, 2 April 1788.

<sup>28</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 206, p. 345; also Boughton-Rouse, *Dissertation*, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> *Risala-i-Zira'at*, Home Misc., vol. 68, p. 733; Boughton-Rouse, *Dissertation*, p. 86; also see B.R. Grover, 1965: 270.

nevertheless placed by it under a larger *zamindar* who collected and paid revenue on their behalf. This was considered an administratively convenient arrangement and was in vogue, for instance, in the *chakla* (revenue circle) of Murshidabad<sup>30</sup>. Third, as has been discussed, the *milkiyat* of a *zamindar* in Bengal could grow out of three major sources: *jangal-bari*, *inteqali* and *a-hukami*, but the *talluqdari* right, as will be seen, was primarily limited to *jangal-bari*. Finally, a *zamindari* was an inherited right which was, at least in theory, dependent upon the sanction of the state, whereas *talluqdari* arose by purchases or grants. One would consider this to be a crucial difference between these two rights for reasons which will be enumerated shortly. When purchased, a *talluqa* was known as *kharida* and those formed by grants, made either by the state or the *zamindar*, were known as *pattai*<sup>31</sup>.

The crucial fact about *talluqdari* was that it was essentially purchased, either from the state or from the *zamindar*<sup>32</sup>, or granted by either of these two agencies on some specific considerations<sup>33</sup>. Regarding the formation of *huzuri talluqas* John Shore expressed the opinion that these "appear to have been originally portions of Zemindarries, sold or given by the Zemindars; and to have been separated from their jurisdiction, either with their consent, or by

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<sup>30</sup> WBSA, PCR Murshidabad, vol. 8, 18 February 1776.

<sup>31</sup> IOR, BRP P/71/25, 24 May 1790; *ibid.*, P/71/25, 4 June 1790; Westland, 1871: 84.

<sup>32</sup> It is interesting to note that a *zamindar* could also be a *talluqdar* by purchase: the *zamindar* of tappa Jaffarnagar was also *talluqdar* by purchase of *mauza* (village) Salia in tappa Alinagar and part of *mauza* Gonya in tappa Haveli, pargana Jahangirnagar in 1774 [WBSA, PCR Dacca, vol. 3, 20 June 1774].

<sup>33</sup> Sometimes, as in Tippera and Mymensing, *jangal-bari* could become *kharida talluqdars* by purchasing the land cleared by them from the *zamindar* [BRP, IOR P/71/51, 9 April 1792; BRC, IOR P/52/13, 11 June 1790].

the interest of the Talookdar with the Governing power"<sup>34</sup>. What John Shore describes seem to be *talluqas* which were initially *mazkuri* and then converted into *huzuri* by the authorities; and this may have been one way in which such *talluqas* were formed during Mughal Bengal. But this could not have been the most prevalent form for two reasons. In the first place, it was widely recognized that the *zamindars* resisted any act of converting *mazkuri* in to *huzuri* (or *khas*) *talluqas*, and sometimes this resistance could turn violent as, for example in Dhaka, where a *mazkuri talluqa* could not be "released" (i.e., made *huzuri*) without "proving the violence of the Zemindars"<sup>35</sup>. *Zamindari* opposition was natural as these *talluqas* were important in the former's financial structure, first, because they were generally purchased for ready cash, and, second, as noted by the Amini Commission:

A talook comprehends only a few villages, or a small tract of ground, and the possessor is able to attend to the cultivation of every part of it. It improves by his care; the rents of it increases & it becomes populous and valuable,

which meant that a *zamindar* could look upon it as a steady source of income, even if it some times amounted to plundering the resources of these *talluqadars*<sup>36</sup>. The fear that "the separation of the talookdars would reduce many of the [*zamindars*] from affluent circumstances, to a state of indigence, and the titles of Rajah & Zemindar, which they enjoy, will become mere empty names"<sup>37</sup> provided the crux of

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<sup>34</sup> FR 2, p.749.

<sup>35</sup> WBSA, PCR, Dacca, vol.13,16 January 1776; also FR 2, p.750.

<sup>36</sup> Brit.Mus., Add.Ms.29086.

<sup>37</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, 4 June 1790.



their opposition to all attempts to convert *mazkuri* in to *huzuri talluqas*: a fact which must indicate the importance of these *talluqas* in *zamindari* finances.

The second reason why the pattern of described by Shore can not be ubiquitously applied to the formation of *huzuri talluqas* in Bengal stems from the fact that the kind of *talluqdars* Shore was describing formed a tiny portion of the social category called *huzuri talluqdars*. Shore's description pertains only to those people who were given such rights (also called *khas*) by virtue of being "some favourite or underling of Government"<sup>38</sup>. These grants were limited to the main administrative centres, they "comprised small mehauls" [*mahls*], and were "generally given to the dependents of the court"<sup>39</sup>. According to James Grant such people:

Were all rich, or favourite individuals in the neighbourhood of the principal Mussulman Capitals, who having obtained small territorial grants... were then to be rated at a fixed annual assessment, subject to no future increase; and as they had probably made some pecuniary compensation by way of purchase of possession, so with the privilege of being exempted from zemmindarry jurisdictions<sup>40</sup>.

The bulk of the evidence pertaining to *huzuri talluqas* indicates that these were formed either by the government with specific administrative and financial considerations in mind, or that they arose from the state's attempt to incorporate a number of "ancient" *talluqdars* (i.e. *talluqas* which were older than the established *zamindaris* in certain

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<sup>38</sup> IOR, SCC, P/A/10, 16 August 1769.

<sup>39</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/52, 13 June 1775.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., P/51/33, 8 March 1788.

areas)<sup>41</sup>, and who were subsequently brought under the direct administration in order to facilitate the collection of revenue.

One of the best examples of the creation of *huzur talluqa* by incorporating such "ancient proprietors" comes from the *Naibat* of Dhaka which was sub-divided, at an early stage of Mughal rule, into a number of small *talluqas* given by the *subahdars* to persons employed in defending the frontiers of the province. The greater number of these were given for the maintenance of the flotilla (*nowarrah*). These lands were then specified in the *jama-i-tumar* (revenue-roll) of Todar Mall in 1588, and the holders were confirmed as proprietors and afterwards made *huzuri* by the Nawabs of Bengal<sup>42</sup>. In Mymensing, *jangal-bari talluqdars* were established much before the establishment of Mughal rule in Bengal; these people acquired lands from "the Bhuyas [*bara bhuiyas*], or before the [Mughal] King got possession of Bengal" and subsequently became *huzuri*<sup>43</sup>. Elsewhere these *huzuri talluqdars* were placed under the supervision of the local *zamindar*, but the state made sure of placing a number of restrictions on the latter's power. Thus in Bakarganj the connections between the state, *zamindars* and *talluqdars* were shaped in the following fashion:

Previous to the division of the country into Pergunnahs & Tuppas & fixing what is called the Tuxeembundy, many persons undertook to cultivate jungle and waste lands; and when the Tuxeembundy was made, these new lands [called *jangal-*

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<sup>41</sup> According to John Shore, "the ancestors of many [*talluqdars*] were in possession of their talooks before the zemindarry jurisdictions in which they are now included were formed, or the families of the zemindars were known" [BRC, IOR P/52/10, 12 May 1790].

<sup>42</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/4, 10 February 1790; also Taylor, 1840: 153-54.

<sup>43</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/13, 11 June 1790.

bari] were constituted Talooks & included in the Jumma-bundy [revenue-roll] of the nearest Zemindar by the Government of that time & if any increase or remission was granted [to] the Zemindar, a proportional part fell to the Talookdar. If the Zemindar withheld from the Talookdar any part of this, he was at liberty to complain to the Government who *compelled* the Zemindar to allow the Talookdar his proportion of the remission.

If the Talookdar died leaving heirs, they got possession of the lands in the same manner as their predecessor & the Zemindar had nothing to do with them but receive his Malguzary [revenue] agreeably to Kistbundy [installments]; but if there happened to be no heirs, *the Zemindar was the manager on behalf of the Government*<sup>44</sup>.

Similar strategies were adopted by the state in western Bengal too. A statement from Birbhum (an extensive *zamindari*) mentions three *huzur talluqas*. First, there were "talookdars whose talooks were formed before the zemindar, to whom they now pay their rents, or his ancestors succeeded to the zemindarry"; second, "talookdars the lands comprised in whose talooks were never the property of the zemindar, to whom they now pay their rents, or his ancestors"; and third were "talookdars who held land under a special grant from government"<sup>45</sup>. In Midnapur, where *talluqdari* rights had developed extensively in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *huzuri talluqdars* were "the purchasers of small portions of lands. They are clearly independent and answer the native terms of Khauridge [free] Talookdars. The same independence as they now possess [in 1792], they possessed previous to the Company's accession of the Dewanny"; these *talluqdars* dealt

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<sup>44</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, From W. Douglas, collector Dhaka, 4 June 1790; emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> WBDR, n.s., Birbhum, 24 May 1790, p. 85.

directly with government officials, called *tehsildars*<sup>46</sup>, who were "stationed to collect the Revenue, recorded them as separate renters [sic] and fixed separate assessments for their talooks, judging them more responsible for their revenue"<sup>47</sup>.

These instances show that *huzuri talluqa* rights were sanctioned by the state because of a number of considerations, these being: administrative convenience (as in Dhaka), easier collection of revenue (in Birbhum) and extension of cultivated land (as in Bakarganj). The case of Bakarganj also shows that great care was taken, or sought to be taken, by the government in order to protect the rights of these *talluqdars* from the *zamindars*; and this was apparently motivated, additionally, by the official objective of recognizing the *talluqdari* as a form of landed property completely distinct from the *zamindari* though occupying a social position inferior to the latter in the landed-hierarchy.

The other type of *talluqa*, the *mazkuri*, existed in one from or another in all areas of the province. Muhammad Reza Khan described the formation of *mazkuri talluqa* in the following words:

A zemindar procures a sanad from the sovereign for waste and uncultivated land, which is not included in the jummah and of which there is no owner. He then grants a pottas of talookdari to several persons who exert themselves in improving the condition of the land, spend money over it and bring it under cultivation. They pay revenue to the zemindar who is entitled to receive it. Another way is when a zemindar sells...a village in his zemindarri. [Then] the purchaser becomes the proprietor of the lands and enjoys the privileges of selling

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<sup>46</sup> *Tehsildars* were also used to collect revenue from some *talluqdars* in Bakarganj [BRP, IOR P/71/26, 4 June 1790].

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., P/72/2, 25 May 1792.

and donating them. The zemindar and the sovereign are to receive the revenue only<sup>48</sup>.

Our sources mention four ways in which *mazkuri* rights could be formed within any particular *zamindari*: (i) persons could take *jangal-bari pattas*, and after successfully cultivating these lands, they assumed *talluqdari* rights; (ii) others purchased waste lands from the *zamindars* and were then recognized as *talluqdars*; (iii) others acquired cultivated lands directly by purchase as *talluqas*; and (iv) some procured, or purchased, *la-kharaj* lands and agreed to pay a stipulated revenue to the *zamindar*<sup>49</sup>. Examples of such *talluqas* in different areas indicate that these were generally created by the *zamindars* either to bring about an extension of cultivation, or to acquire ready cash by selling portions of their *zamindari* to those who could afford, or were willing to buy. Bakarganj had *pattai* and *kharida talluqdars*<sup>50</sup>; similar rights existed in Jessore<sup>51</sup>. In Birbhum, *mazkuri talluqdars* were those who "purchased their lands by private or publick [sic] sale, or who obtained them by grant from the zemindar to whom they pay their rents"<sup>52</sup> In Midnapur, "many have obtained talooks, either in former [i.e., Mughal] times by private purchase or in these latter times by public purchase by auction"<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> CPC, vol. 8, op. cit., pp. 421-22.

<sup>49</sup> WBSA, Khalsa, vol. 1, 4 January 1775; BRP, IOR P/71/26, 25 May 1790.

<sup>50</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, 4 June 1790.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., P/71/25, 24 May 1790; IOR, BRC P/52/17, 2 August 1790.

<sup>52</sup> WBDR, n.s., Birbhum. op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>53</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/50, 23 October 1789; also see BRP, IOR P/72/2, 25 May 1792.

*Pattai talluqas* were specifically established by the *zamindars* to bring about an extension of cultivation. Such *talluqdars* were apparently responsible for "improving the condition of the land" by spending money and bringing it under cultivation<sup>54</sup>. While doing so, the *talluqas* were held free of revenue for the first two or three years and afterwards made to pay their share of the "general rent" of the *pargana*, along with certain taxes fixed on a customary basis (*nirakh-i-dastur*) payable to the *zamindar*; these *talluqas* were inheritable by the family of the holder, but could not be sold, or alienated, without the consent of the *zamindar*, who also had the first right of rejection<sup>55</sup>. In Bakarganj, for instance, these *talluqdars* were not meant to pay revenue for the first two three years, but after that time there was to be a progressive increase (*rasad*) until the stipulated rate of revenue (*pura dastur*) was obtained--the entire process usually took about five years<sup>56</sup>. In Dhaka, a *zamindar* would take a contract (*taahud*) from a *talluqdar* for a stipulated sum of money to be paid after five years on a progressive rate of increase<sup>57</sup>.

When *mazkuri talluqas* were created by sale of *zamindaris* they closely approximated landed property of a private kind since these *talluqdars* were empowered by the

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<sup>54</sup> CPC, vol.8, op.cit., p.421.

<sup>55</sup> WBSA, Khalsa, vol.1, 14 December 1775.

<sup>56</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, 4 June 1790; also Beveridge, 1876: 194.

<sup>57</sup> For example a *tahuud* of Rs.4294-5 annas taken by a *talluqdar* in Buzurgumedpur (in 1779) shows the following rates of payment to be made to the *zamindar*:

Payment in the first year	Rs.3001
Payment in the second year	Rs.3326
Payment in the third year	Rs.3651
Payment in the fourth year	Rs.3936
Payment in the fifth year	Rs.4294-5 annas

WBSA, PCR Dacca, vol.25, 29 September 1779.

act of purchase to sell, alienate and mortgage their properties without any restrictions<sup>58</sup>. They were also entitled to fragment their rights among members of the family. In this event, and if the *talluqa* happened to be held by the collateral branches of a family, the descendants of the "original founder" was to be given an extra share<sup>59</sup>. In Birbhum, *talluqdars* of this type could be found "succeeding" to others' *talluqas* "by right of purchase, gift or inheritance"<sup>60</sup>, and in Bakarganj, these people, called *zer-kharid talluqdars*, were at "liberty to sell with or without the permission of the zemindar"<sup>61</sup>.

In fact the sale of these rights had created certain sub-*talluqdars* in the Naibat of Dhaka. In Bakarganj we come across the *ausat*<sup>62</sup> *talluqdars*, who were described as a "talookdar within a talookdar"<sup>63</sup>. In *pargana* Bikrampur we are told of the existence of *howaladars* (holders of property by transfer) in the following description:

In the pergunnah of Bekrampur a custom prevails that if any talookdar sells any part of his talook to another person, upon receiving the purchase price he calls him a Howalladar of so much land, who pays his rents to the talookdar; but if any dispute arises between the talookdar and the howalladar, he can get his howallah separated from his talookdar & included in some other talookdar's lands. [The *howaladar*] is subject to increase or

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<sup>58</sup> Beveridge, 1876: 416; *CPC*, vol. 8, p. 422; *WBSA*, PCR Murshidabad, vol. 23, 17 February 1780 and 3 April 1780 for a list of mortgaged *talluqas* in Murshidabad.

<sup>59</sup> *WBSA*, PCR Dhaka, vol. 3, 25 July 1774.

<sup>60</sup> *WBDR*, n. s., *Birbhum* <sup>60</sup>12, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>61</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, 4 June 1790.

<sup>62</sup> Literally one holding or occupying a middle position.

<sup>63</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, 4 June 1790.

decrease of Revenue along with the other renters [sic] & the property is hereditary & transferable<sup>64</sup>

One cannot be certain whether sale of *talluqas* in other areas of the province created such specifically demarcated sub-*talluqdaris* as in Bakarganj and Bikrampur in eastern Bengal. In Midnapur, we are told, there existed a sub-category called the *gutch-amini talluqdar* who "were taxed with the charge of insolvent talookdars and made responsible for the revenue, and the original proprietors remaining unable to answer their Revenue, they continued in other's hands"<sup>65</sup>. This category corresponds closely to the system followed in Dhaka where a number of small *talluqdars* were placed under a bigger one who collected and paid their revenue; this *talluqdar* was called *zimmadar*, his own *talluqa* was called *neez* (personal) and comprised the only real property belonging to him<sup>66</sup>. What we can not be sure of is whether these intermediary rights were actually purchased.

Nevertheless, the fact that these *mazkuri talluqas* were created by purchase and then were saleable is indisputable. "All talookdars" noted Shore in 1788, "unless restricted by the terms of their grants under which they hold, have a right to dispose of their lands by sale, gift or otherwise; ... and indeed this practice prevails in opposition to the condition of their pottahs"<sup>67</sup>. A bill of sale had to be signed by the seller and witnessed by "his partners, and by the zemindar [along with] the people of the neighbourhood [and then] attested by the seal of the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., P/72/2, 25 May 1792.

<sup>66</sup> Taylor, 1840: 154.

<sup>67</sup> FR 2, p. 750; emphasis added.



Kazi [*Qazi*] and the signature of the Canongoes"<sup>68</sup>.

To the extent, however, that *mazkuri* was a purchased right, it implied that the *zamindars* were under no formal obligation to create such *talluqas* within their territories. The extent of such sales appears to have depended upon the capacity, or willingness, of the local people to purchase such *talluqas*, as well as upon the immediate financial requirements of a *zamindar*. In Midnapur, for instance, almost all *talluqas* were established by the sale of *zamindari* lands as the following description shows:

Zemindars were originally proprietors of the whole of some of the Mehals which are now Talookdarry. From extravagance, indolence or neglect of their lands, from badness of season or other causes, being unable to pay their Revenue, or support their extravagance, they were constrained to sell portions of their lands as they were pressed by either one or other of these necessities. In this manner sometimes the whole Mehal was disposed of<sup>69</sup>

Financial considerations were also accompanied by the desire to bring about an extension in cultivated land. In the latter case, *mazkuri talluqas* were granted by *pattas*. A survey of the history of 34 such *talluqdars* in *pargana* Jalalpur (in 1791) revealed that 14 *talluqas* were created by purchases, whereas the rest, 20, were established by the *zamindars* through grants<sup>70</sup>. In Muhammad Aminpur, *chakla* Hughli, there were 62 *mazkuri talluqas* in 1778<sup>71</sup>. The proportion of *mazkuri talluqas*, in terms of *jama*, in some

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<sup>68</sup> WBSA, Khalsa, vol.1, 4 January 1775.

<sup>69</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/2, 25 May 1792.

<sup>70</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/31, 10 June 1791.

<sup>71</sup> Brit. Mus., Add. Ms. 29088, f.123.

*zamindaris* is outlined in table 3 below.

Table 3

Mazkuri Taluqas in six zamindaris of Bengal

1	2	3	4
<u>Year</u>	<u>Zamindari</u>	<u>Gross Jama</u> <u>(Rupees)</u>	<u>Mazkuri Jama</u> <u>4 as % of 3</u> <u>(Rupees)</u>
1768	Mahmudshahi	271885	80149
1769	Yusufpur	400182	33139
1772	Burdwan	4328509	66660
1777	Nadia	1585498	17059
1778	Dinajpur	1460444	20000
1778	Rajshahi	2964631	370879

Source: WBSA, CCRM, Appendix to Proceedings, vol.5; FR 2, pp.333, 415, 480; Ramsbotham, 1926: 132.

The nature of *la-kaharaji* property

*La-kharaj*, or charity lands were created by the Mughals, and later the Nawabs by:

Grants [of land] with certain privileges and exemptions annexed to the tenure, whether flowing from the favour of the Prince, or granted as a reward for services, or yielded as the condition upon which the original grantees engaged to reclaim or improve the lands; or finally as pious donations from the respective Princes to the Ministers of the established religion, or for other

charitable purposes<sup>72</sup>.

Once again, like the *talluqdari*, we find the need to extend the land under cultivation emerging as one of the major considerations behind the creation of *la-kharaji* rights in pre-British Bengal. The major difference between such rights and those of the *zamindari* or *talluqdari* was that lands held *la-kharaji* did not have to pay any revenue since they were initially given as charity or in lieu of service. Thus these grants embraced two social groups. The first were service-grants (called *chakeran*) which comprised territorial assignments made for meeting the expenses of servants and employees. The second category, called *baz-i-zamin*, signified all kinds of charitable support to "religious edifices and colleges [sic]" since the support of such institutions was "deemed sacred under the feudal Mogul Government"<sup>73</sup>. Such grants were also known as *kharij-jama* (revenue free), and in the revenue records of the Company this term is often used interchangeably with *la-kharaji*.

The pressing need to extend cultivation and its connection with the creation of various types of landed-properties is nicely borne out by the spread of *la-kharaj* lands in the frontier regions of the province in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The reason why the best spots of land in Chittagong were held *la-kharaji* in 1788 was ascribed to the need to pacify that area after Aurangzeb defeated the Maghs in 1666. The upheaval caused by the Mughal invasion had caused "persons having the means of subsistence to live elsewhere"; the district "thus became the resource of needy persons who on applying to men in office under the Government found no difficulty in

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<sup>72</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/50, 7 February 1775.

<sup>73</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/48, 11 November 1788; also *FR* 2, pp. 268-70.

procuring charity grant for such lands as they were disposed to reduce to a state of cultivation"<sup>74</sup>.

Sylhet provides another example. Here the state's need was to prevent the "incursions of the hill people" in to Bengal, for which a *faujdar* was appointed from "the Nabob's nearest relations, or confidential friends, to whom it was in fact a jaghier, and little more was expected by government than a few elephants, some chunam, oranges and birds of handsome plumage". The task of settling such tracts of land was entrusted to the *faujdar* who,

Being followed by a multitude of needy dependents was liberal in his gifts without expense to himself, and never failed to bestow upon them large tracts of land upon a charity tenure under his own seal<sup>75</sup>.

As in the case of *talluqdari*, the *zamindars* were quick to follow the example set by the state. Large chunks of revenue-paying (*hasil*) and waste (*patit*) land were given out by the *zamindars* and, to a lesser extent, by the *talluqdars* as *chakeran* and *baz-i-zamin* "in the names of their friends, relations and dependents"<sup>76</sup>. Such grants were apparently made with the approval of the state before 1765<sup>77</sup>. For instance, the *zamindars* of Bisnupur were apparently assessed at a very small *peshkash* (tribute) under the Mughals on grounds of the *zamindari* "being a frontier of the Province" which "enabled [them] to lay by considerable sums of money from the revenues of the Country [Bishnupur], which for the major part appear to have been

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<sup>74</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/2, 10 February 1790.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., P/52/5, 24 November 1787.

<sup>76</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/27, 8 May 1787.

<sup>77</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol. 8, 5 December 1771.

expended for religious purposes"<sup>78</sup>. The Company was deeply suspicious of all such grants on the grounds that these were detrimental to the state's financial interests since they did not pay revenue<sup>79</sup> and that *zamindars*:

Have carried this practice [i.e. granting *la-kharaji*] so far as to have the malguzarry [revenue paying] land totally incapable of yielding the jummah and suffered [sic] the nominal zemindarry to be sold for the balance, retaining the bazee zemin, a profitable estate, for their support<sup>80</sup>.

Table 3.1 shows the distribution of *baz-i-zamin* in some *zamindars* before and after 1765, for which comparable estimates are available.

Table 3.1

Grants of baz-i-zamin by some zamindars,  
before and after 1765  
(in bighas)

<u>Zamindari</u>	Before 1765	After 1765
Rangpur	2,45,760.35	83,880.8
24-Parganas	3,18,113.50	70,763.15
Nadia	7,43,144.25	62,283.35
Burdwan	12,629.00	7,184.9

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<sup>78</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/21, 1 December 1790.

<sup>79</sup> *FR* 2, p.28.

<sup>80</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/27, 8 May 1787.

Bishnupur	93,130.86	11,506.25
Muhammadshahi	2,04,653.75	12,516.30
Birbhum	91,927.80	17,933.60 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>: The figures for Birbhum are for the year 1770.

Source: Rangpur: BRC, IOR P/52/17, 6 August 1790; 24-Parganas: *ibid.*, P/52/21, 1 December 1790; Nadia: BRP, IOR P/71/12, 13 August 1789; Burdwan: BRC, IOR P/52/21, 1 December 1789; Bishnupur: *ibid.*, 1 December 1790; Muhammadshahi: BRP, IOR P/71/13, 27 August 1789; Birbhum: Factory Records, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/1, 5 October 1770.

The *baz-i-jama* lands were meant for the upkeep of a whole range of dependents ranging from, as in Rajshahi, "Bramins, Mohunts, Sannasies, Gungabassies [widows], Fakirs, Pirs & ca"<sup>81</sup> to (in Coch Behar) "servants and muttassudies [revenue officials]... poor Bramins, *Rajahs* & the Kitmutgars [*khidmatgar*, or servant] & Bearers"<sup>82</sup>. Unfortunately, there is very little evidence to compare these lands to *raiya*ti (land held independently by the peasants). Nevertheless, the evidence collected by J. Sherburne, the collector of Muhammadshahi in 1787 is extremely significant in this respect. A list of the registered *baz-i-zamin* holders there shows the following picture<sup>83</sup>:

<u>Land (<i>bigha</i>)</u>	<u>Number of holders</u>	<u>Total land (<i>bigha</i>)</u>
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<sup>81</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/20, 10 October 1790.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, P/49/42, 16 November 1773; emphasis added. The term *Raja* here obviously refers to the petty *zamindars* in Coch Behar which was an autonomous chieftainship under the Mughals.

<sup>83</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/24, 6 February 1787. The term registered was used to denote those people who had valid *sanads* and had these registered in the *sadr daftar*. There were others who held lands without any *sanads*, and the Company always thought that they outnumbered the ones who had registered.

1 to 50	3421	66739.70
51 to 100	58	39708.35
101 to 150	216	26926.20
151 to 200	68	11910.70
201 and upward	275	62803.20

This list also provides a very rare comparison of *baz-i-zamin* with the *raiyati* or *malguzari* lands in four villages of Muhammadshahi in the following fashion<sup>84</sup>:

<i>Mauza</i>	Total land ( <i>bigha</i> )	<i>Raiyati</i> ( <i>bigha</i> )	<i>Baz-i-zamin</i> ( <i>bigha</i> )
Jagkarna	318.26	73.50	244.76
Gopinatpur	378.86	38.90	339.96
Byraddey	515.06	56.65	458.41
Jaikispur	614.25	58.65	555.60

Another estimate of such lands made in two *parganas* (Amberabad and Bhuluah) in eastern Bengal shows the following trend<sup>85</sup>:

Total land	408504	<i>bigha</i>
Forests	2408	"
<i>Daria Shikast</i> or carried away by rivers	23808	"
For salt production	8456	"
<i>La-kharaji</i>	55352	"
<i>Raiyati</i>	318480	"

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/46, 3 November 1775.

*Pargana Apole* in the *zamindari* of Dinajpur had its lands divided in this manner<sup>86</sup>:

Total Lands	1,12,375 <i>bighas</i>
Waste since 1770	20,276 "
Forests	1,401 "
<i>La-kharaj</i>	34,377 "
Cultivated	56,321 "

A statement regarding the distribution of lands in seven villages in Jalasor in 1792 contains the following information (in *bighas*)<sup>87</sup>:

Total land	<u>Baz-i-zamin</u>	Waste land	<u>Raiyati</u> land
6150.75	859.90	1109.95	4180.90
1433.50	165.25	76.00	1192.25
7977.70	1178.90	2170.70	4628.10
2007.40	305.40	22.70	1679.30
2320.45	334.90		1985.50
1123.50	211.65	40.05	871.80
1628.35	185.01		1443.34

Land given as *chakeran* constituted the other component of these revenue-free properties. Table 3.2 gives a comparative picture of *chakeran* lands in some *zamindaris* for which data are available. It must be borne in mind that the data in table 3.2 pertain to *zamindaris* after they had been quite extensively de-militarized by the Company's regime, which means that the extent of land alienated as *chakeran*, or the number of officials who held such lands, must have been far greater under the *Nizamat*.

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<sup>86</sup> Testimony of Sibprasad Tagore, *chaudhury* of the *pargana* in BRC, IOR P/50/1, 1 August 1777.

<sup>87</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/43, 20 April 1792.



Table 3.2

Chakeran-zamin in some zamindaris (bighas)

Year	<u>Zamindari</u>	Total land	Militia	Officials
1766	Burdwan	3,58,516.00	2,39,238.00	1,19,278.00
1770	Muhammad-shahi	1,54,629.35	29,873.60	1,24,755.75
1770	Bishnupur	1,55,681.96	96,987.90	58,694.06
1770	Birbhum	1,50,237.35	86,413.65	63, 823.70
1770	Dinajpur	2,73,316.15	1,52,117.70	1,21,198.45

Source: For Burdwan, WBSA, Proceedings of the Select Committee, vol.2, 28 October 1766; for Muhammadshahi, Bishnupur and Dinajpur, WBSA, CCRM, Appendix to Proceedings, volumes, 1 and 7; for Birbhum, Factory Records, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/1, 10 October 1770.

It was a recognized fact that most eighteenth century *zamindars* had large establishments of officials and other servants, including a sizeable militia, who were maintained by grants of extensive tax-free lands in lieu of pay. These persons were

*The Zemindar's own particular servants, paid by him in land and not in specie... . Only a small part of them are at fixed stations, such as are appointed to guard and protect the Cutcherries and Gunges and those placed over the Zemindars Kummar [khamar] and his fruit trees. The far greater number are employed under the mandals [village headmen] and other officials in the mofussil [country] to collect Rents from the Ryotts, and in measuring lands and a variety of occasional duties. It is the business of some to carry orders from the Head Cutcherry [zamindari courts] and circulate them throughout the country [i.e. the zamindari], whilst others escort treasure going from and coming from the Sudder*

[*zamindari* headquarters]. *In fine they are intimately connected with every branch of the Revenues*<sup>88</sup>.

The arrival of the Company meant a substantial reduction in the number of *zamindari* troopers<sup>89</sup>, but what vexed the Company greatly was that this de-militarization was not accompanied by a corresponding reduction in the quantity of land alienated as *chakeran* in various *zamindaris*. In fact one of the major suspicions harboured by Company officials was that lands "secreted" under this denomination had actually increased after 1765. Thus in the seven years between 1777 and 1783, 44975 *bighas* "of all most good land" were alienated as *kharij-jama* in 24-Parganas, whereas between 1769 and 1776 such grants had totalled 9972 *bighas*<sup>90</sup>. In Rajshahi, 39,280 *bighas* had been added to the existing *chakeran* lands between 1778 and 1789; *baz-i-zamin* had increased by 23,205 *bighas* in the same period<sup>91</sup>. In Birbhum the additions to *chakeran* lands totalled 90,790 *bighas* between 1777 and 1787<sup>92</sup>. Between 1773 and 1787 the estimated value of lands alienated as *baz-i-zamin* in Midnapur and Jalasor had gone up substantially, as the following figures show<sup>93</sup>:

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<sup>88</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/25, 9 June 1780; emphasis added.

<sup>89</sup> Evidence of the reduction in the numbers of *zamindari* troopers is available in WBSA, Proceedings of the Select Committee, vol. 2, 28 October 1766 for Burdwan; FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/1, 10 October 1770 (for Birbhum) and 16 October 1770 for Dinajpur.

<sup>90</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/27, 8 May 1787.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., P/71/12, 30 July 1789.

<sup>92</sup> Compare FR 2, p. 335 and Sinha, 1968: 272.

<sup>93</sup> Compare BRC, IOR P/49/38, 17 March 1773 and *ibid.*, P/51/19, 11 April 1788.

	Year	Value of <i>baz-i-zamin</i> (rupees)
Midnapur	1773	42, 821
"	1787	1, 000, 85
Jalasor	1773	10, 738
"	1787	20, 920

The supposedly phenomenal increase in such lands after 1765 was ascribed as one of the major difficulties in the collection of revenue from Dinajpur as "the management of these alienated articles-- the collection and expenditure-- are placed under separate and distined [sic, distinct?] officers, the business transacted privately and secreted from inspection"<sup>94</sup>.

Unfortunately, the proportions of *chakeran* and *baz-i-zamin* in lands alienated as *la-kharaji* cannot be worked out for all *zamindaris*. Evidence from the *zamindaris* of Dinajpur and Rajshahi show the following distribution of such lands (in *bighas*)<sup>95</sup>:

	<i>La-kharaji</i>	<i>Baz-i-zamin</i>	<i>Chakeran</i>
Dinajpur (1770)	419,436.85	1,66,635.70	2,52,801.15
Rajshahi (1789)	7,26,324.00	4,52,354.00	2,73,970.00

One feature of such grants is certainly quite apparent. These grants definitely allowed small numbers of people, whether officials or militia, to take control of large tracts of land. Thus in Dinajpur, 266 *zamindari* horsemen jointly held 26, 478 *bighas* of land in 1770<sup>96</sup>,

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<sup>94</sup> WBSA, BRFW, vol. 6, 6 November 1786.

<sup>95</sup> For Dinajpur, WBSA, CCRM, Appendix to Proceedings, vol. 2, 13 to 30 December 1770; for Rajshahi, BRP, IOR P/71/12, 30 July 1789.

<sup>96</sup> WBSA, CCRM, Appendix to Proceedings, vol. 2.

which gives us a grant of 99.54 *bighas* per capita. In Burdwan, 710 *huzuri* servants (those attending to the person of the Raja) held 81, 240 *bighas* (or 114.42 *bighas* per head) in 1766<sup>97</sup>, and in Birbhum, 204 *thanadars* held 16, 385 *bighas* (80.32 *bighas* per person) in 1770<sup>98</sup>. In Burdwan, 438 persons were given 19, 000 *bighas* as *baz-i-zamin* after 1765<sup>99</sup>, which gives us a grant of 43.38 *bighas* per person. The fact that the generic term *la-kharaj* amounted to giving extensive territorial control to a privileged few in rural society is revealed in table 3.3 which represents the state of *la-kharaji* in 1778 according to the findings of the Amini Commission.

Table 3.3

Kharaj-i-jama in eleven districts. 1778

1	2	3	
District	Gross <i>Jama</i> (rupees)	<i>Kharaj-i-jama</i> (rupees)	3 as % of 2
Nadia	1,585,498	4,78,731	30.19
Hughli	276,062	1,16,548	42.21
Jessore	483,388	1,19,304	24.47
Bishnupur	518,731	2,43,548	46.95
Jahangirpur	363,750	38,542	10.06
Rajshahi	2,964,631	6,63,839	22.38
Birbhum	1,144,825	2,35,888	20.06
Purnea	1,909,214	7,34,907	38.49
Pachete	154,423	20,481	13.26
Rangpur	1,650,655	1,84,503	11.11
Dhaka	5,463,561	8,01,572	18.59

Source: Brit.Mus., Add.Ms.29086, 29087, 29088.

According to the Commission about 5,600,942 *bighas* of land were held as *la-kharaji* in the areas surveyed by it in

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<sup>97</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Select Committee, vol.2, 28 October 1768.

<sup>98</sup> FR, Murshidabad, G/27/1, 10 October 1770.

<sup>99</sup> Sinha, 1968: 272.

1778<sup>100</sup>. John Shore added another 2,775,000 *bighas* alienated as *kharij-jama* in areas not surveyed by the Amini Commission, and adopting a standardized revenue rate of 1 rupee 8 annas per *bigha*, Shore calculated that the holders of such lands jointly held revenue-lands worth nearly Rs.12,563,913 in 1789<sup>101</sup>. If, as Shore reported, the revenue rate of 1 rupee 8 annas per *bigha* represented about 40 per cent of the produce in the 1780s<sup>102</sup>, then the material assets actually controlled by the *la-kharaji* holders could easily be in the range of 31,409,782 rupees. This made them effective controllers of at least 9.54 per cent of the province's gross agricultural product *circa* 1790<sup>103</sup>, for which they paid no revenue. It is therefore not surprising that it was difficult, both for the state and the *zamindar*, to dispossess such people from their grants which, over the years, had come to assume distinct features of private property.

First, these lands had become inheritable by the successors of the original grantees as a matter of right<sup>104</sup>. Second, like all things privately owned, these lands were bought and sold. Since they did not pay revenue, *la-kharaji* land-values were not expressed as a ratio of the assessed revenue (*jama*) as was done in the case of *zamindari* and *talluqdari*. Thus *la-kharaji* lands were sold as privately owned properties having independent monetary values. Scattered evidence from Midnapur indicates that the value of such lands there had increased from 2.1 rupees per

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<sup>100</sup> Brit.Mus.,Add.Ms.29086, f.8-9.

<sup>101</sup> *FR* 2,p.28.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*,p.519.

<sup>103</sup> According to Colebrooke, the gross agricultural output per year was 329,130,000 rupees *circa* 1790 [*Remarks*, pp.15-16].

<sup>104</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/20, 27 October 1790.

*bigha* in 1732 to 5.01 rupees in 1759<sup>105</sup>; unfortunately the state of prices for such lands after 1759 are not known. In eastern Bengal such lands were valued at prices ranging from 13 to 3 rupees per *bigha* depending on their location<sup>106</sup>. In 1786 Charles Grant purchased 1194.45 *bighas* of *madad-i-ma'ash* land in *pargana* Rokunpur, *chakla* Akbarnagar for 7000 rupees<sup>107</sup>. In Nadia such lands could be purchased at a "fair price" of 8 rupees a *bigha*<sup>108</sup>.

The paucity of evidence does not allow us to make exact estimates regarding the frequency of such sales. It is nevertheless, though tentatively, possible to posit that the sale of *la-kharaji* had become pervasive in the late eighteenth century. This period was certainly marked by a fairly rapid and increasing sales of all kinds of landed property, in which *la-kharaji*, being another such property, in all likelihood formed an important part. It is perhaps extremely significant that *la-kharaji*, when sold, fetched a higher price when compared to the sale values of *zamin-daris* or *talluqdaris*. In Dhaka, "an alienated, or Rent free land of 100 r[upee]s produce is valued at 10 years produce when purchased & consequently is equal to 1000 [rupees]"<sup>109</sup>, whereas the sale prices of *zamindaris* seldom exceeded five times their *jama*<sup>110</sup>. It is therefore entirely feasible that the landed proprietors all over Bengal replicated the example of the 24-Parganas where *zamindars*,

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<sup>105</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/41, 26 July 1782.

<sup>106</sup> WBSA, PCR, Dacca, vol. 3, 1 July 1774.

<sup>107</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/1, 9 September 1786.

<sup>108</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/37, 30 March 1791.

<sup>109</sup> WBSA, PCR, Dacca, vol. 1, 9 December 1773.

<sup>110</sup> G.C. Meyer, Preparer of Reports, Department of Khalsa, in BRC, IOR P/51/33, 25 March 1789. John Shore believed that, apart from Calcutta, "the price of revenue land sold [never] exceeded the revenue for two years", Ibid., P/51/27, 26 November 1788.

and even *ijaradars*, were happy to put up their revenue-paying (*malguzari*) lands for sale, though they secretly purchased, or acquired, *la-kharaji* which was deemed "a profitable estate for their support"<sup>111</sup>. The collector of Birbhum was convinced that by the "annual secret appropriation of malguzzary lands under the head of neez-talooks and bazee zemin" the *zamindar* had actually cornered nearly 67,035 *bighas* of land between 1770 and 1787 to his "private advantage"<sup>112</sup>. In fact one of the most perceptive of the Company's observers, Sir John Shore, was quite definitive that "*proprietors and possessors* of Rent free lands" made "considerable additions to the quantity originally held by them & so as in several instances have doubled the *property* founded in just title"<sup>113</sup>.

#### Landed proprietors and the economy: the case of *zamindars*

That the *zamindari* was not a unit of production is certainly an acknowledged fact, but to say that the *zamindars* had practically no role in the production process<sup>114</sup> cannot easily be accepted. Unlike the feudal *demesne*, the *zamindars* did not actually organize production in all the territories under their jurisdiction, but a *zamindari* was an *agglomeration of otherwise dispersed production units centred in the villages*, and this being so a certain interaction between the landholder and

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<sup>111</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/27, 8 May 1787.

<sup>112</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/20, from J. Sherburne, 14 May 1788.

<sup>113</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/40, 3 May 1782; emphasis added.

<sup>114</sup> As argued for instance by Ray and Ray [1975].

production was bound to take place. The provision of "soft" agricultural loans (*taqavi*) and the maintenance of irrigational and flood controlling embankments (*pulbandi*) were recognized as the traditional functions of the *zamindars*. These functions were most pronounced in case of the *jangal-bari zamindars*, who were given *sanads* "on condition that within the Boundaries the jungles should be cleared, embankments and water courses made, inhabitants brought from other places and land put in to a state of cultivation"<sup>115</sup>. Reclamation in Chittagong was "often assisted by the Zemeendar... with money as a temporary support" to the peasants<sup>116</sup>. The crucial position occupied by the *zamindars* in the entire network of reclamation of land and the extension of cultivation will be discussed further in chapters 4 and 5, but their importance can be seen in the fact that in the extensive *zamindari* of Nadia, *pateet* lands of intrinsically good quality could not be reclaimed because of the financially distressed situation of the *zamindar*<sup>117</sup>.

These *zamindars* also had the responsibility of overseeing the maintenance of flood-controlling embankments and the construction of local irrigation networks. There were two forms in which this task was traditionally undertaken: *khas pulbandi*, or embankments made by the government and *zamindari pulbandi*, or the embankments constructed by the *zamindar*. The costs of the former task were defrayed either by remission of revenue or by levying *mathot* (imposts), while those of the latter were the responsibility of the

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<sup>115</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/32, 7 July 1794, *arzi* of Debnarain Roy, Sadr Qanungo of Hijli outlining the history of his *zamindari* since *circa* 1720.

<sup>116</sup> Brit. Mus., Add. Ms., 19286, f. 19.

<sup>117</sup> CCR, IOR P/67/62, 13 June 1776.



*zamindar* "in whose countries the works are carried on"<sup>118</sup>. The other job, that of irrigation, was another *zamindari* duty which was of local importance since as we have seen (chapter 2) these tanks and wells could become crucial for the survival of high-value crops during dry seasons. In fact the drought of 1769/70 became particularly severe because these devices of subsidiary irrigation dried up owing to a protracted failure of the monsoon in that year.

Most areas had "public... and private tanks... dug at the expense of individuals from religious and other purposes, the waters of which are more than sufficient for the preservation of the crops of the *proprietors* of them"; these tanks were located in *malguzari*, *la-kharaji* and *khamar* lands<sup>119</sup>. Designed essentially as back-up irrigational facilities and as sources of drinking water, these tanks were nevertheless important for a number of reasons. First, the very act of digging these tanks meant the clearing of waste lands and certain financial gains for the *zamindar*: if the tank owner was the *zamindar* it became his private property, if it belonged to somebody else then the *zamindar* received a *salami* ranging from 50 to 100 rupees per tank. In Birbhum, "it is the custom, added to the salamy, for the person to pay immediately 9 years rent for the lands occupied by the tanks, after which he holds it rent free". Second, "the tanks are a source of great profit to the zemindar, from the fish bred in them; and the produce of Tall [*tal*, or palm] trees planted on the banks; and as they are situated on eminences they supply water for the plantations around them"<sup>120</sup>. Provision of agricultural

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<sup>118</sup> WBSA, Proceedings of the Controlling Committee of Revenue, vol. 1, 16 March 1771; BRC, IOR P/49/51, 14 March 1775.

<sup>119</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/36, 21 October 1791; emphasis added.

<sup>120</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/13, 24 August 1789. The *tal* (palm) trees gave them an additional income because they were usually leased to the toddy tappers to manufacture liquor [BR Misc., IOR P/89/36, 29 October 1790).

credit and flood control or irrigational duties could not have been far removed from production, at least in the *khamar* or *nij-jote* lands. Additionally, the clearance of forests and reclamation of cultivable waste (*patitabad*) were rights entrenched with the *zamindars*, as were those of pasturage (*gaucharee* or *gop mahal*) which provided them with a supplementary income<sup>121</sup>.

The sphere in which the *zamindars* participated directly in agricultural production was in the cultivation of their personal lands. It is generally recognized that a *zamindar's* income arose from the financial perquisites sanctioned by the state (*nankar*)<sup>122</sup>, but there were other sources of their financial survival and these have not been placed in a proper perspective in the existing historiography of the province. Briefly stated, a *zamindar's* income arose from a combination of state sanctioned perquisites, a plethora of agricultural and non-agricultural taxes levied from the peasants and artisans, duties collected from market places and local trade and from "the profits of *neez talooks*"<sup>123</sup> and their *khamar* lands<sup>124</sup>. It is with the latter, the *neez-talluqa* and *khamar*, that this section is concerned.

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<sup>121</sup> In the *zamindari* of Coch Behar, *gaucharee* was farmed out to others [BRP, IOR P/71/35, 25 November 1790]. In Birbhum access to pasturage was taxed by the landholder at the rate of 0.063 rupee [1 *anna*] per cow and 0.125 rupee [2 *anna*] per buffalo [BR Misc., IOR P/89/36, 5 July 1790].

<sup>122</sup> *Nankar* was usually rated as 10 per cent of the assessed revenue, which could be paid either as a separate deduction from the revenue in cash or as portions of rent-free lands. I have discussed the importance of *nankar* in *zamindari* incomes in "Aspects of the Agrarian System of Bengal during the Late Eighteenth Century", M.Phil. dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1980, chapter 1. *Nankar* lands in Jahangirpur (in 1772) were stated at 42,695.70 *bighas* [see Proceedings of the Committee of Circuit, IOR P/70/15, 8 October 1772].

<sup>123</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/45, 16 March 1774.

<sup>124</sup> FR, IOR G/27/1, 16 October 1770.

Historians acknowledge the existence of these lands in the framework of the *zamindari*, but they underemphasize their importance on the grounds that these constituted only a small portion of the gross cultivated area<sup>125</sup>. True as this may have been in the overall context of agricultural production, *nij-jot* and *khamar* lands were certainly significant both in extent and in terms of their social importance *at the local levels*. Estimates of *khamar* lands available suggest that these were substantial. The *zamindar* of Bishnupur held nearly 21,000 acres as *khamar*, that of Dinajpur occupied 3885 acres and the lands held by the *zamindar* of Birbhum were 12,887 acres; smaller *zamindars* in eastern Bengal had personal lands ranging from 750 to 400 acres<sup>126</sup>, though in Jahangirpur these *khamar* lands were a hefty 23,616 acres<sup>127</sup>. These lands were given over to the cultivation of fruits and other products of a superior quality, which were then sold at the local market places<sup>128</sup> often established by the *zamindars* themselves (see chapter 1).

Profits from the sale of such produce contributed to a *zamindar's* income over and above the customary perquisites allotted to him by the state<sup>129</sup>. The average yearly earnings from such lands of the *zamindar* of Birbhum constituted 28.97% of his annual income between 1766 and

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<sup>125</sup> See, B.B. Chaudhuri, 1984: 104; R. Ray, 1979.

<sup>126</sup> WBSA, CCRM, appendix to proceedings, vol.1, 3 December to 10 December 1770, p.32; Ibid, vol.2, 13 December to 30 December 1770, p.170; BRC, IOR P/49/40, 4 June 1773, p.1981; WBSA, PCR Dacca, vol 14, dt.28 February 1777; Ibid, 28 February 1777.

<sup>127</sup> Proceedings of the Committee of Circuit, Dacca, IOR P/70/15, 8 October 1772.

<sup>128</sup> WBSA, CCRM, Appendix to proceedings, vol.1, p.32; BRC, IOR P/49/39, 26 March 1773.

<sup>129</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/45, 16 March 1774.

1771<sup>130</sup>. In Dinajpur, "the Rajas Profits, exclusive of his allowances in ready money, arise *principally* from the Comar lands and the farms in his hands"; the income from such lands was estimated at 30,000 rupees a year in 1770, which was considered "~~much~~ *smaller* than what most of the [other] Zemindars enjoy"<sup>131</sup>; but by 1786 "profits" from these lands were bringing in 58, 889 rupees a year to the *zamindar* of Dinajpur, thereby constituting nearly 14.78 percent of the Raja's income of 3,98,423.75 rupees in that year<sup>132</sup>. For others, such lands contributed between 34.8% and 6.9% of their gross annual income<sup>133</sup>.

There were other ways in which these lands were of importance in the working of the *zamindari* in Bengal. It was a universally acknowledged fact that they were held free from any governmental interference in matters of assessment<sup>134</sup>. Therefore these were the lands where a *zami-ndar* could hope to make improvements without inviting the financial attentions of the state. The situation seems to have changed somewhat under the closer interest taken by the East India Company in *zamindari* affairs, but there is not enough evidence to say that the privileges enjoyed by the landholders in their personal lands had been severely eroded in the second half of the century<sup>135</sup>. Moreover there were no fixed rules about the division of the produce

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<sup>130</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/40, 4 June 1773.

<sup>131</sup> FR, IOR G/27/1, 16 October 1770; emphasis added.

<sup>132</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/66, 7 April 1786.

<sup>133</sup> For estimates see Sinha, 1968: 328-45.

<sup>134</sup> Even as late as the 1770s these lands were said to be paying revenue at the original rates established by the Mughals in 1582 [WBSA, CCRM, 30 March to 28 August 1772, appendix to proceedings].

<sup>135</sup> For the continuation of such privileges in Burdwan see BRC, IOR P/49/42, 10 December 1773; for Midnapur, see Ibid, P/51/20, 5 February 1773; and for Birbhum, see Ibid, P/51/20, 14 May 1788.

between the *zamindar* and the cultivator in these lands. This often resulted in an arbitrary division of the crop by which the *zamindars* raised their share at the expense of the peasants<sup>136</sup>. In terms of appropriation, these were the lands in which the *zamindars'* claim to the surplus was highest when compared to those arising from the lands cultivated by the independent peasants<sup>137</sup>.

Of greater significance to this discussion is the organization of production on these *khamar* or *nij-jot* lands. Here we find the *zamindars* not only organizing production but also acting in a fashion was closely replicated by the *jotedars* on their lands (discussed in chapter 4). The *zamindars* worked their lands by sharecroppers, the basis of which was a combined use of economic levers and non-economic coercion: the economic mechanism assumed the form of capital invested, whereas the non-economic dimension was the use of force. The Amini Commission (1778) noted the widespread prevalence of sharecroppers and their use by the *zamindars*<sup>138</sup>. In Burdwan, a *zamindar's khamar* was "cultivated by the ryotts under engagement of receiving a share of the crop according to the sort of land they stipulate... or by taking a share after gathering in the crop"<sup>139</sup>. In Rangpur, where there were a multitude of petty *zamindars*, the common practice was to let a sharecropper (*proja*, or *adhiar*) work on the *zamindar's* lands at a third of the produce plus small plots of land given by the landholders to enable the *adhiar* to construct homesteads and to grow some essential food supp-

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<sup>136</sup> WBSA, PCR Burdwan, 1 March to 29 Dec. 1775, 29 Dec. 1775.

<sup>137</sup> For a similar situation in Mughal north India see Habib, 1963: 141-43.

<sup>138</sup> See IOR Home Misc. vol. 201, pp. 335-401.

<sup>139</sup> WBSA, PCR Burdwan, 3 June to 31 July 1776, 22 June 1776.

lements<sup>140</sup>. Force often entered into this relationship: physical confinement and flogging were the landholders' stock in trade in order to tilt the balance in their favour in cases of disputed shares<sup>141</sup>.

The use of force was vital in the economics of the *zamindari*. Discussing the agrarian structure in pre-industrial west Europe, Robert Brenner suggests that force was a vital element in the dynamics of income distribution, because not only did it decide the rent relationship, it also established the distribution of landed property between lord and peasant *prior* to the actual division of the immediate product of the land between the two<sup>142</sup>. The actions of Bengal *zamindars* in the late eighteenth century do not appear to have differed substantially from their contemporaries in most of Europe. The full implications of sharecropping and the kind of exploitation these cultivators were subjected to will be discussed in chapter 4.

Significantly, the *zamindars* of Bengal do not appear to have used unpaid labour (*begar*) for production on their lands. The only recorded case of such labour comes from Birbhum where under the denomination of *sa'ir silpa khana* (tax on artisans), the *zamindar*

Could demand the attendance and labour of the Blacksmiths, Carpenters, Goldsmiths and Florists, and each artificer of this description when called was obliged to attend and work for the space of ten or fifteen days in the year, so that no one attended twice in the same year, and assist in the *zamindari buildings and other works receiving only a small daily allowance and diet money*. Such as did not attend from distance or other cause *paid a consideration or fine agreeable to their circumstances*, which money was

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<sup>140</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/10, 20 March 1790.

<sup>141</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/33, 13 September 1787.

<sup>142</sup> R. Brenner, 1988: 16.

brought to the zamindar's *private account*<sup>143</sup>.

The above example shows that unpaid utilization of labour was not a salient feature of agricultural production, though the *zamindar* perhaps was vested with the right to call in the services of artisans for his domestic requirements. Some payments, no matter how small, were made for these services and the artisans had the choice to get their services commuted by paying a "consideration or fine". In any case the practice in Birbhum was abolished by the government in May 1790 which, according to the collector, "diffused the greatest satisfaction" in the district<sup>144</sup>. Customary labour or service claims by the *zamindars* were practically absent in the rest of the province. For the Company, these *zamindars* were notorious for taxing "everything that is carried on a Road or embarked on a River or purchased in a market or brought in a private house"<sup>145</sup>, but they were never accused of using *corvee* labour for production in their lands.

This absence was in striking contrast to the situation in the neighbouring province of Bihar where the Company's officials recorded an apparently widespread use of slave labour in the cultivation of *zamindari* lands. In Bihar, the terms *mullazadah* and *kahar* were used to differentiate between Muslim and Hindu slaves. In either case these people were "considered in the same light as any other property & [were] transferable by the owner or [descended] at his demise to his heirs"; though the practice of selling and buying of slaves had apparently declined in the eighteenth century, slaves, for whom slavery had descended

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<sup>143</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/14, 7 July 1790, and BR Misc., IOR P/89/36, 5 July 1790; emphasis added.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> "State of Bengal in 1786: A Report Compiled by Mr. Beaufoy on 12 April 1786" in IOR, Home Misc., vol. 382, p. 81.

through generations, nevertheless remained, and the *al-tamgha* (permanent and hereditary) lands of the *zamindars* were actually cultivated "by the hands of these slaves who also [performed] the menial offices of the [*zamindar's*] house"<sup>146</sup>. The fact that the estimated annual produce from these *al-tamgha* lands was worth 8, 45, 150 rupees in the 1780s<sup>147</sup> must surely indicate the fairly extensive use of unfree labour in production by the Bihar *zamindars*.

The *zamindars* of Bengal organized agricultural production on their personal lands by striking a specific social relationship with the peasantry. The use of a sharecroppers on their *khamar* lands was a device to commercially exploit the small-holding and resource-constrained cultivators, the details of which will be examined in chapter 4. Through sharecropping *zamindars* invested capital in agricultural production and attempted to maximize the appropriation of the surplus, the principal mechanisms of which were interest rates and the distribution of the product in their favour (see chapter 4 for details). In essence, sharecropping involved remuneration for labour, a notional wage, determined by the distribution of the agricultural product, the terms of which were regressive and biased against the cultivator.

#### Landed proprietors and the economy: the *talluqdars*

Data regarding the actual operation of a *talluqdari*, its internal management and relations with the peasantry are scarce, thereby making a detailed study of its productive significance very difficult. The evidence of the

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<sup>146</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/46, 16 August 1774.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., P/50/51, 12 March 1784; also *ibid.*, P/50/54, Appendix to Consultations.



growth of this form of landed property (discussed above) indicates quite forcefully that in both its forms *talluqdari* was a product of two specific requirements of the agrarian economy. It was, at one level, a direct manifestation of the desire of the *zamindars*, and of the provincial government, to effect an extension of cultivation. At another level, it was one way in which the *zamindars* could get hold of ready cash by selling such rights. Both suggest that these *talluqdars* possessed the finances necessary for the development of agricultural production. Moreover, a *talluqa* being a small territorial unit, and therefore easily manageable, lessened the administrative workload in a relatively larger *zamindari* and this was probably another consideration in a *zamindar's* willingness to establish *talluqas* in his territory. In any case these *talluqdars* were financially important for the *zamindars*. One reason why the *zamindars* in eastern Bengal were violently opposed to all plans of separating *mazkuri talluqas* from their authority was because such *talluqas* were used by them as security to get loans from money-lenders, and they feared that "when the moneylenders will see that the talooks are to be separated from us, they will distress us so much for our loans that life itself will not be worth holding"<sup>148</sup>

The most important function of these *talluqdars*, especially those held *mazkuri*, was to organize and oversee an improvement of cultivation. In Jessore *mazkuri talluqa pattas* were given to those people "who appear to have done something in the way of improving their lands"<sup>149</sup>. In Birbhum when crops failed, or the peasants deserted owing to a succession of bad harvests, these *talluqdars* reportedly encouraged them to "come back in their season of

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<sup>148</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/14, *arzi* of the *zamindars* of Jalalpur, 23 June 1790.

<sup>149</sup> Westland, 1871: 80; also BRP, IOR P/71/25, 24 May 1790.

cultivation, their lands being granted to them at something lower than the usual rate [of revenue]"<sup>150</sup>. The *talluqdars* in the *zamindari* of Buzurgumedpur often borrowed "considerable sums of money from the merchants and made advances to the ryotts" in order to get their lands cultivated<sup>151</sup>. In Jalalpur "the expectation of having the lands cultivated and the revenues improved and their own advantages" were three considerations which shaped the nature of *mazkuri talluqas* as "possessors of hereditary properties"<sup>152</sup>. It is interesting to note that while *zamindars* in the late eighteenth century universally pleaded their inability to encourage agricultural production because of largely fictitious financial constraints, the *talluqdars* were specifically required to improve and extend cultivation as one of their primary duties. These *talluqdars* uniformly claimed that they "spend a great effort in improving their lands & in extending cultivation at a great expense, in advancing money to the Ryotts to clear the lands for cultivation and in devoting their time and attention to superintend & direct the improvement of them"<sup>153</sup>. In the 24-Parganas, the *talluqdars* were said to be regularly advancing "Tuccavy to their Ryotts, to enable them to commence and continue the Cultivation of the current year, [re]payable around the month of Poos [December-January]"<sup>154</sup>, i.e., after the major *aman* (winter) harvest.

In this respect a *talluqdari* perhaps represented an enterprise with close links with the agrarian economy, perhaps a lot closer than the *zamindars*. The inadequacy of

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<sup>150</sup> WBSA, PCR Burdwan, vol.5, 9 January 1776.

<sup>151</sup> WBSA, PCR Murshidabad, vol.23, 21 January 1779.

<sup>152</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/14, 7 June 1790.

<sup>153</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol.8, 30 December 1771.

<sup>154</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/6, 1 August 1792.

evidence does not allow us to reconstruct the exact relationship between them and the cultivators. The impression that we get from contemporary accounts is that the peasants in the *talluqas* were treated more leniently than their counterparts in a *zamindari*. According to Richard Becher:

The Tenants of Talouks are possessed of so many indulgences & taxed with such evident partiality & tenderness in proportion to the rest, that the Talouks generally swarm with inhabitants, while other parts are deserted. In addition to the natural desire of changing from a worse to a better condition, enticements are frequently employed by the Taloukdars to augment the concourse to their lands<sup>155</sup>.

Becher's statement is also supported by the Amini Report which says:

A Talook comprehends only a few villages, or a small tract of ground, and the possessor is able to attend to the cultivation of every part of it. It improves with his care; the rents of it increase & it becomes more populous & valuable than those parts of the District which remain under the management of the Zemindar or his officers<sup>156</sup>.

Such descriptions suggesting that the cultivators enjoyed greater security in *talluqas* than elsewhere is also substantiated by an account of *talluqdari-raiyat* relations in Dhaka. This account states that peasants in a *talluqa* enjoyed greater security, this being seen in the fact that "they often remain in the same spot, son after father, cultivating the same piece of land" owing to:

The perfect agreement between them and the talookdar. The Ryott being the immediate cultivator of the land, the talookdar's interest

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<sup>155</sup> SCC, IOR P/A/9, 16 August 1769.

<sup>156</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 206, p. 347.

is intimately connected with his, since if he is oppressed he will immediately desert. [Hence] the talookdar... is most concerned in the cultivation [sic] of them [and] is under a necessity of permitting him to enjoy his small right<sup>157</sup>.

Nevertheless, and despite these descriptions, there is no hard evidence to show that the position of the peasantry actually improved in these *talluqas*. Not all *talluqdars* actually lived up to the Company's dream of finding a coterie of benevolent landed proprietors in Bengal in the run-up to the Permanent Settlement. Even in the 24-Parganas where some *talluqdars* provided *tagavi* to fund the winter harvest (see above), they were amply matched by those who were "not guided by a similar liberal principle" and from whose territories "the Ryotts actually fled, ... or were obliged to borrow money at exorbitant interest payable from the produce of the first crop"<sup>158</sup>. *Tagavi* was not always available as "the talookdars, from their extreme poverty can afford the Ryotts no assistance to the improvement or extension of their cultivation"<sup>159</sup>.

Bankruptcies were common among *talluqdars* as they were among the *zamindars*. *Talluqas* could "daily go to ruin and [*talluqdars*] not be able to pay malguzarry and cultivate them"<sup>160</sup>, at which point they were sold, often at largely deflated prices, a process in which the *zamindar* had the first right of rejection. Impoverished *talluqdars* in *pargana* Laskarpur, "immediately abscond when pressed for rents"<sup>161</sup>, and in Dhaka they were often forced to "relinquish their lands by Istuffa [*istifa* or resignation]

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<sup>157</sup> WBSA, PCR Dacca, vol.16, 21 July 1777.

<sup>158</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/6, 1 August 1792.

<sup>159</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/4, 29 January 1787.

<sup>160</sup> WBSA, PCR Murshidabad, vol.23, 17 February 1780.

<sup>161</sup> WBSA, PCR Murshidabad, vol.6, 24 July 1775.

from a total inability to discharge their rents"<sup>162</sup>, in which case these *talluqas* naturally reverted to the *zamindar* who usually sold them again<sup>163</sup>. Thus the possibilities of peasants actually improving their positions in these *talluqas*, or the extent to which these proprietors could provide the cultivators with a way out from the *zamindar's* exploitative control, appears remote. It is perhaps significant that the report from Dhaka (cited above) which suggests that *talluqdars* and peasants operated on a "perfect agreement" also says that these peasants "can be scarce considered in any other light than as day labourers, earning little more than is necessary for the maintenance of themselves and [their] families"<sup>164</sup>.

#### *La-kharaji* and the agrarian economy

Proprietors of *la-kharaji* lands were also closely associated with the agrarian economy for, as has been discussed, their origins and future existence (especially for those held as *baz-i-zamin*) depended almost exclusively on their capacity to extend cultivation. *Baz-i-zamin* lands initially comprised both revenue paying cultivated (*hasil* or *malguzari*) and waste (*patit*) lands<sup>165</sup>. In *pargana* Muhammadshahi 12,516.30 *bigha* were given as *baz-i-zamin* between 1770 and 1789; of these 2877.10 *bighas* comprised

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<sup>162</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/10, 10 July 1778.

<sup>163</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, 4 June 1790.

<sup>164</sup> WBSA, PCR, Dacca, vol. 16, 21 July 1777.

<sup>165</sup> In Bengal waste lands denoted "land that has not been in cultivation for the last four or five years" [BRC, IOR P/52/9, 7 May 1790]. Since *chakeran zamin* was given to officials in lieu of pay, it is quite likely that these lands were situated mostly in cultivated areas.

*hasil* lands while the rest (9639.20 *bighas*) were situated in *patit* lands<sup>166</sup>. Of 1738.04 *bighas* of *baz-i-zamin* granted in *pargana* Mahisadal in 1790, 930.48 *bighas* were distributed in *hasil*, and the remaining 807.56 *bighas* were located in *patit* lands<sup>167</sup>. Such data do indicate the close connection between *la-kharaji* and agricultural production. In Sylhet, for instance, "the property of these waste lands" was fixed on the grantee and the "quantity [of waste land] contained in each pergunnah [was] divided among the several parties in the same proportion as they enjoy the cultivated land": a practice which was traditionally recognized as one of the best means of inducing an extension of cultivation<sup>168</sup>.

The greatest advantage enjoyed by *la-kharaji* property was that it did not have to pay any revenue or taxes either to the state or to the local *zamindar* "however it may be cultivated"<sup>169</sup>. This provided the proprietors with extra funds to invest in extending the land under cultivation. Moreover, these lands were mostly given to individuals "independent of any partnership" in order to prevent disputes or fragmentation<sup>170</sup> of the type which plagued the *zamindars* and the *talluqdars*. A *la-kharaji* was also exempted from defraying "any charge for the repair of Bunds [embankments] and other publick [sic] works necessary for their preservation"<sup>171</sup>, which meant that overheads were substantially reduced. The Company did not look upon the holders of such lands as being conducive to an efficient revenue administration, but the continuation of such

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<sup>166</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/13, 27 August 1789.

<sup>167</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/21, 1 December 1790.

<sup>168</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/24, 28 March 1780.

<sup>169</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/15, 5 October 1789.

<sup>170</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/24, 28 March 1780.

<sup>171</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/24, 6 February 1787.

financial privileges despite the state's disapproval would appear to be in contravention to its attempt to enforce rigorous collections of revenue. This fact is striking and must therefore indicate the continuing importance of such properties in the agrarian milieu of the late eighteenth century.

There is unfortunately no evidence to show the patterns of cultivation or the nature of labour use on these lands. Evidence from Muhammadshahi shows that 12,516.30 *bighas* were given as *baz-i-zamin* between 1765 and 1789; of these 9639.15 *bighas* were *patit* and 2877.15 were *hasil* lands. The *hasil* lands were cultivated in the following fashion<sup>172</sup>:

Land (*bighas*)    % of *hasil*

Mulberry and other		
"superior crops"	223.25	7.76
Various types of		
rice and other		
"inferior crops"	2494.45	86.70
Lentils	159.45	5.54

The absence of comparative data from other areas does not allow generalizations regarding the economic content of these *la-kharaji* lands, but it would perhaps be true to say that these lands, and the proprietors, had a significant role in the agrarian economy. Crops like mulberry and lentils were surely cultivated for commerce; so were rice and the other "inferior crops". Given the rising demand for food in our period (see chapter 1) it is inconceivable that the output of rice and paddy from these lands was designed for a purpose other than sale. The fact that *baz-i-zamin* holders were also instrumental in establishing a whole

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<sup>172</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/13, 27 August 1789.

range of markets, from *ganjs* to *hats*, "solely for their own profit"<sup>173</sup> must surely indicate that these people combined a number of functions which were significant in furthering the pace of commercialization.

As a composite social group possessing substantial resources, these people were crucial to the local economies. The role of the *chakeran zamin* holders was particularly important in generating demand for rural produce and in speeding the processes of commercial exchange. They were given revenue from land in lieu of income. These lands were large, so were the resources. They consumed, which meant that "many of the poorer classes subsisted by providing them with food, clothing and furniture"<sup>174</sup>.

Their influence on agricultural production was also significant. *Baz-i-zamin* holders were entrusted with the task of extending the land under cultivation on extremely lucrative financial terms. After all no concession could be more lucrative than the freedom from taxation in the late eighteenth century. Given this privilege, it is entirely feasible that their lands were cultivated more efficiently than normal *raiya* or even *zamindari* lands. At least John Shore thought that this indeed was the case which:

Was effected by withdrawing the Ryotts from the Revenue Lands, and inducing them to settle on the Bazee Zemin, which the Proprietors can afford to rent to them on easier terms than a [revenue] Farmer or Zemindar who pay an assessment for the lands held by [them]<sup>175</sup>.

Such indeed was the case in Muhammadshahi where:

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<sup>173</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/9, 9 April 1790 for Burdwan; *ibid.*, 28 April 1790 and 8 April 1790 for Mymensing and Jessore respectively.

<sup>174</sup> Tennant, *Indian Recreations*, I, p. 264.

<sup>175</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/40, 3 May 1782.



The Bazee Zemin is so extensive that the possessors of it are competitors with Government for the Ryotts; and as they enjoy the Rents of their lands without participation... they can afford to let them at a considerable reduced rate [of revenue]; and those [lands] of Government [i.e. *malguzari*] are consequently deserted, while theirs are stocked with numerous inhabitants<sup>176</sup>.

In Birbhum some peasants from *malguzari* lands would move to *baz-i-zamin* as:

They are encouraged to do so from the low terms which the possessors of these places grant to Ryotts..., which they can afford as the rents arising from the increase in the cultivation of their lands is clear profit to them, and it is certainly a great inducement for a Ryott to desert and cultivate these grounds<sup>177</sup>.

This report also says that the cultivators of *baz-i-zamin* paid 12 annas (0.75 rupee) per *bigha* to the holder in comparison to "a rupee and a half for *malguzarry* lands". In Birbhum such lands totalled 1,09,861.40 *bighas* in 1770 (see table 3.1 above) which means that the "clear profit" from cultivation for these proprietors was at the very least in the range of 82,396.05 rupees per annum in our period.

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<sup>176</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/24, 9 October 1786.

<sup>177</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/54, 11 July 1775.

## Chapter 4

### **The Peasantry in Late Eighteenth Century Bengal**

Peasants constituted the keystone of Bengal's agrarian life, but their history in the late eighteenth century is yet to be comprehensively analyzed. Some scholars who have ostensibly sought to study the structure of peasant society have succeeded only in describing the various peasant rights and categories, catalogued by the revenue officials of the Company on the eve of the Permanent Settlement<sup>1</sup>. Others have attempted to demonstrate the existence of a "rich" peasant "class" lording over the *zamindars* on the one hand and a mass of low-caste landless peasants on the other. They have additionally attempted to show the creation, in our period, of a "class" of peasants who were subsequently to become widespread in Bengal under the generic appellation of *jotedars*. These *jotedars* are variously described as "the village oligarchy" and/or the "village landlords" of the eighteenth century, and their origins are located their origins in the economic impact of the Company's revenue regime and the agrarian dislocation caused by the disastrous famine of 1769/70<sup>2</sup>. This interpretation is interesting but difficult to accept, at least for the eighteenth century, the reasons for which I will discuss subsequently.

If Ray and Ray have erred on the side of overstatements, B.B.Chaudhuri has discussed the changing

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<sup>1</sup> N.K.Sinha, 1968; S.Islam, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Ray and Ray, 1975; R Ray, 1979

context of agrarian relations in post-1765 Bengal without addressing himself to the specifics of the province's peasant society, or analyzing the nature of stratification, if any, in it<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, Chaudhuri has very little to say on the state of the *peasants* as a *distinct* social category in the agrarian system. His focus is therefore limited to landed property which (as pointed out in chapter 1) represents the dominant trend in Bengal's historiography where revenue history is equated with *economic* history. Additionally, the agrarian developments in the period between 1765 to 1793 have been insufficiently studied by Chaudhuri since almost the *entire* range of his evidence pertains to the *nineteenth* century. Elsewhere, where Chaudhuri discusses the connections between control over production and agrarian power over the long-term (1757-1947)<sup>4</sup>, we are placed in a similar difficulty, viz., that of seeing the developments in the nineteenth century in order to understand those in the eighteenth. Though Chaudhuri disagrees with Ray and Ray on the domination of the so-called *jotedars* in rural society before the late nineteenth century, he does not provide us with a viable alternative analysis of peasant stratification in our period.

There is therefore an urgent need to reconstruct the major features of Bengal's peasant society in the eighteenth century. This chapter aims to do that in order (a) to establish the social position of different peasant rights and categories which constituted the core of agrarian Bengal, and (b) to see whether the label "rich" peasant "class" has any relevance for the kind of stratification specific to Bengal in the late eighteenth century.

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<sup>3</sup> See B.B.Chaudhuri, 1983: 86 ff. and 295-301.

<sup>4</sup> B.B.Chaudhuri, 1984.

Peasants in late eighteenth century Bengal: a historiographical overview

The revenue records of the East India Company are full of terms like "ryott", "reiatt" and "ruatt" which, in continuation of the Mughal tradition, were generically used to denote the status of an individual as a cultivator and a revenue-payer. These terms were essentially corrupted usages of the Persian term *raiyyat* which, in Bengal, meant "the immediate occupant of the soil, whether... a proprietor or tenant" who tilled the land and paid a "rent". These *raiyyats* were "a numerous & inferior class of people, who [held] and cultivate[d] small spots of land on their own account"<sup>5</sup>.

Agricultural production was overwhelmingly organized on small peasant farms which were operated by individual peasant families depending on their domestic labour. It was generally accepted that a plough being worked by a pair of draught animals was capable of cultivating between 15 *bighas* (5 acres)<sup>6</sup> and a maximum of 25 *bighas* (8 acres)<sup>7</sup>. The extent cultivable by a plough obviously depended on the nature of the soil. Where the soil was hard the land cultivated by a plough and a pair of bullocks was less. Thus in *pargana* Swaruppur "the usual quantity of land cultivated by one plough requiring two oxen, a man and a boy may be fairly computed on an average of 8 *bighas* (2.6 acres)..."<sup>8</sup>.

Scanty area statistics for the eighteenth century make it difficult to present statistical profiles of peasant

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<sup>5</sup> Final Report of the Amini Commission, 1778, IOR Home Misc., vol. 206, pp. 345-46; Brit. Mus., Add. Ms., 29086.

<sup>6</sup> Colebrooke, *Remarks*, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> James Grant in *FR* 2, p. 276.

<sup>8</sup> J.H. Harrington to Council of Revenue, BRC, IOR P/52/10, 12 May 1790

holdings for the entire province. In Dinajpur there were peasants who held up to 165 *bigha* (55 acres) of land, but such landholdings were generally not replicated elsewhere<sup>9</sup>. Peasants having 7 to 10 acres of land were categorized as the "influential ryott" in eastern Bengal<sup>10</sup> whereas in western Bengal a peasant could be classified as such with lands ranging from 20 to 10 *bighas* (6.6 to 3.3 acres), depending on the geographical location of the individual's holding and its commercial importance<sup>11</sup>. Thus in Midnapur, "influential ryotts" were those who held 20 *bighas* or more. In contrast were their compatriots in villages around the city of Murshidabad (a centre of urban consumption and the capital of the province before 1757), who could still be influential and relatively affluent with 10 *bighas* (3.3 acres) of land at their disposal. It must however be stressed that peasants having 10 *bighas* or less were the poorer peasants (the "inferior ryott") in the rest of the province. The situation in Dinajpur was therefore unique and does not reflect the state of peasant holdings at the provincial level. The reasons why this was so will be analyzed later in this chapter.

Positioned below these "influential ryotts" were those peasants who are identified in our sources as the "poorer" or the "inferior class" of *rai-yats*. They held less than 5 acres of land, possessed only a pair of bullocks and a single plough, cultivated with the use of their family

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<sup>9</sup> A peasant category called 'principal farmers' by Buchanan-Hamilton held between 60 and 165 *bighas* of land in Dinajpur in the early nineteenth century and they constituted about 6 percent of the cultivating population [Martin, 1976, vol.3: 906]

<sup>10</sup> For Rangpur, [IOR, BRC P/52/10, 20 March 1790] and for Jessore [BRC, IOR P/51/22, 23 July 1788, p.131; also W.W.Hunter, 1894, vol.1: 52]. Interestingly, a person holding 10 acres in Dinajpur was categorized as a "poor farmer" in Dinajpur.

<sup>11</sup> WBSA, PCR: Burdwan, vol.1, 6 June 1774; IOR, BRC P/51/32, 4 February 1789.

labour alone and had no reserve stocks to tide over *even* one season of scarcity<sup>12</sup>. These comprised 80 percent of the rural population in the villages of *pargana* Swarooppur surveyed in 1790 by the Company's revenue officials<sup>13</sup>. They formed nearly 70 percent of the cultivating population of Dinajpur in the beginning of the nineteenth century<sup>14</sup>. J.H.Paterson, commissioner at Comilla, was convinced that "this class of ryotts are by far the most numerous", <sup>15</sup> and in Rangpur even those peasants who had not incurred major debts had practically no reserves "even of a stock sufficient for their subsistence..."<sup>16</sup>.

There is another social group whose existence in the eighteenth century needs to be explained. These were the sharecroppers (the *bargadar* or the *adhiar*) whose existence is relatively well documented in our period (see below). The existence of a group of people providing their labour to cultivate another's land for a share in the produce may at first glance appear paradoxical in a society where land was so easily available. Yet examples of sharecroppers being viciously exploited by *zamindars*, merchants and revenue-farmers (*ijaradars* and *qutquinadar*) on *zamindari* lands are numerous, and this needs an explanation. It is also necessary to examine the historical validity of the view which identifies sharecroppers as the "untouchable landless groups" working the lands of a "rich" peasant "class"<sup>17</sup>. It is perhaps extremely significant that in the extensive *zamindari* of Burdwan, the village headman

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<sup>12</sup> Datta, 1986: 391-94.

<sup>13</sup> BRC, IOR P/57/50, from J. Harrington to Council, 20 March 1790, pp. 842-46.

<sup>14</sup> Buchanan-Hamilton, 1833.

<sup>15</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 3 April 1789.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Buchanan, "Account of Ronggoppur", IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, volume 3, book 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ray and Ray, 1975: 84; Ray, 1979: 52.

(*mandal*)<sup>18</sup> was sufficiently happy to limit his activities to giving periodic agricultural loans to the peasants in need "to purchase implements of husbandry and for their immediate subsistence"<sup>19</sup>, but it was the *zamindar* who used sharecroppers (*sanjhadars*) to cultivate his personal (*khamar*) lands on terms which were highly oppressive<sup>20</sup>. Rural inequalities in land distribution and the need felt by the richer peasantry to reduce supervision costs<sup>21</sup> may not be adequate in explaining the prevalence of a sharecropping peasantry in a situation of land abundance (as in eighteenth century Bengal). Their existence in our period perhaps becomes explicable only where persons wanting to use them had *more* land than could be cultivated by family labour alone, or where merchants required lands to be cultivated for purposes of trade. In Bengal the former occurred in the case of the *zamindars* and the *jotedars*, but the latter (i.e. merchants getting lands cultivated for trade) does not seem to have developed to an extensive degree. Merchants created separate instruments for exploiting the small-peasants. This I discuss in Chapter 6.

The other peasant group which requires detailed analysis is the *jotedar*. Discussions of the *jotedari* in Bengal centre around the extent to which it was a specific *peasant* relation of production and rural power. These are concerned also with analyzing the connection between the *jotedars* and the evolution of a type of tenurial arrangement which subsequently became most prevalent all over

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<sup>18</sup> The role of the *mandal* occupies a central position in Ray's [1979, chapter 2] analysis of the so-called 'village oligarchy'.

<sup>19</sup> WBSA, PCR Burdwan, vol 18, 17 January 1777.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid; also BRP, IOR P/72/4, 6 July 1792.

<sup>21</sup> Rashid Perteve [1986: 46-47] explains sharecropping as a device adopted by the richer peasantry to cut costs of supervision in a situation dominated by small land holdings and rural inequalities in land distribution.

eastern India viz., the sharecropping (*bargadari*) system. The term *jotedar* has been used to express social relations ranging from kulak-landlordism<sup>22</sup> to a "master-serf relationship" between peasants themselves<sup>23</sup>. The *jotedars* have been treated as a social group "synonymous with the village landlord"<sup>24</sup>. The specific class nature of the *jotedari* in the nineteenth century (when it apparently became widespread) is beyond the scope of this chapter, but (as will be discussed below) it was far from either of the two classifications (i.e kulak-landlord or village landlord) in the eighteenth. Ray's attempt to restate his thesis<sup>25</sup> on the basis of the descriptions of rural stratification provided by Colebrooke, Sir John Shore (discussed below) and Buchanan-Hamilton's descriptions of the districts of Dinajpur and Rangpur circa 1807<sup>26</sup>, seems to equate the existence of a rudimentary form of differentiation within the peasantry with the *jotedars*. With the possible exception of Buchanan-Hamilton<sup>27</sup>, all other contemporary commentators on agrarian matters almost invariably referred to the "influential ryotts" or to the "superior ryotts", the social implications of these strata I will discuss shortly.

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<sup>22</sup> A.Ghosh and K.Dutt, 1977.

<sup>23</sup> Ray and Ray, 1975.

<sup>24</sup> Ray, 1979: 54.

<sup>25</sup> Rajat Ray, 1988.

<sup>26</sup> Also Buchanan, "Account of Ronggopur", IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75.

<sup>27</sup> Even Buchanan-Hamilton's descriptions of tenurial arrangements in the districts of Dinajpur and Rangpur circa 1808 do not refer to *jotedars* as a specific term apparently in widespread prevalence. For Dinajpur, the term used is "principal farmers" to describe agriculturists who held more than more than 55 acres [165 *bigha*] of land, possessed capital assets ranging from 5000 to 20000 rupees and cultivated with the use of sharecroppers. In the case of Rangpur, he describes a variety of such tenures without once using the term *jotedar* [see "Account of Ronggopur", vol. 2, Book 4, IOL Ms. Eur. D 75, ff. 102-104, 111-113].



The definition of the *jotedar* as a kulak-landlord or even as a village landlord is difficult to sustain *before* the nineteenth century. The term landlord implies that these *jotedars* *owned* the lands they cultivated. This would be untrue, even as an implication. The *jotedars* took lands on long-term leases from the *zamindars* and then had them cultivated either by contracting, on a sharecropping basis, with the "ryots of the villages most contiguous for their cultivation"<sup>28</sup> or by recalling an "absconding ryott or settling a deserter from some other place to cultivate for his benefit"<sup>29</sup>. Established peasant rights in the *jotes* were recognized by a set of customary codes, the workings of which will be examined subsequently. The use of the term "kulak" to describe the *jotedars* is also misleading. In the classical sense a "kulak" was a semi-capitalist or a small capitalist farmer in the Russian countryside<sup>30</sup>. As Bernstein points out a "kulak" is an "all-round agent of the extension of commodity relations"; a "kulak" combines a number of economic functions: he is a commercial farmer who employs labour power, rents out the necessary means of production, provides local "merchant's and money-lending capital" and invests in trade and small-scale processing and manufacturing enterprises<sup>31</sup>. Ray's model seeks to find these features in the *jotedari* of eighteenth century Bengal: a model which, I propose, is not substantiated by the available historical evidence .

The other concern in discussions of *jotedari* is the question of timing its dominance in rural society. While Chaudhuri sees such *jotedars* as an established fact in

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<sup>28</sup> This prevailed in Burdwan [BRC, IOR P/51/21, 16 July 1788].

<sup>29</sup> This was the situation in Purnea, see BRP, IOR P/71/28, 7 July 1790.

<sup>30</sup> Terry Cox, 1984: 48.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Bernstein, 1979: 43; emphasis added.

rural Bengal only after 1859<sup>32</sup>, others tend to push the timing further into the century, even as late as 1885, in the midst of a growing agricultural depression in the province<sup>33</sup>. One point about the emergence of these *jotedars* seems to be clear: their increasing dominance is seen to be closely connected with a growing pressure on land, rising food prices detrimental to the cultivators, a noticeable shift towards cultivating lands of marginal productivity and increased sale and transfer of peasant lands, often as a result of distress sales<sup>34</sup>. In other words the rise of the *jotedar* is linked, not with the expansion of cultivated land, as in the late eighteenth century, but with a noticeable halt in the process of reclamation and the onset of an economic recession. Regarding the geographical spread of this tenure Chaudhuri tends to view its prevalence in those regions where "a few resourceful persons organized large-scale reclamation", thereby making it an all-Bengal phenomenon<sup>35</sup>, whereas Bose sees it mainly limited to the northern parts of the province<sup>36</sup>; in either case *jotedari* is not seen as a major production/power relation before the mid-nineteenth century. In this chapter the nature of the *jotedari* in the late eighteenth century will receive detailed scrutiny.

While opinions differ on the nature of the *jotedari* before the late nineteenth century, there is a strong consensus among historians about the nature and role of another peasant right, that of the *pahikashta* (non-resident) *raiya*t after the famine of 1769/70. It is

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<sup>32</sup> B.B.Chaudhuri, 1984: 119.

<sup>33</sup> See for instance, W. van Schendel and A.H. Faraizi, 1984.

<sup>34</sup> Chaudhuri, 1984: 121; Schendel and Faraizi, 1984: 29-31.

<sup>35</sup> Chaudhuri, 1984: 119.

<sup>36</sup> S. Bose, 1986: 11-18.

generally accepted in existing historiography that the famine of 1769/70 fundamentally altered the existing structure of peasant society and strengthened the previously nascent position of a rich peasant strata. For instance, N.K.Sinha saw in the famine a fundamental rupture of "the old social life" in rural Bengal. Depopulation meant that lands fell out of cultivation which in turn fostered a competition for labour among the landlords. In this situation, the relative advantages shifted in favour of the non-resident (*pahikashta*) cultivator at the expense of the surviving resident (*khudkashta*) peasant who was further ruined by the additional impositions (*najai*) which were levied by the landlords in order to recoup their losses suffered during the famine<sup>37</sup>. Sinha's view regarding the post-famine situation closely follows those developed by W.W.Hunter who argued that agricultural recovery was henceforth only possible by attracting the labour of the "vagrant peasants" (those who had been uprooted from their lands) by offering them under-rated leases of land<sup>38</sup>.

Ratnalekha Ray has provided an interesting interpretation of the post-1770 situation. She disagrees with Hunter and Sinha that the rise of a rich tenantry can be simply looked at in terms of a favourable land-labour ratio after the famine. For Ray the significance of the famine was situated in the fact that it "gave splendid opportunities to villagers with capital to increase their holdings by employing their capital to bring waste lands under their cultivation"; this kind of capital could not have come from merchants and bankers, or from the "territorial magnates" for "they were in no position to engage in the enterprise of reclaiming waste, for it needed personal and on-the-spot supervision"; agricultural reclamation was therefore the task "of a class of rich peasants", these being "an extremely influential and

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<sup>37</sup> Sinha, 1968: 62, 64.

<sup>38</sup> Hunter, 1897: 62-63.

violent class of villagers who had compelled the zamindars to give them under-rated tenancies so as to employ their capital in clearing the waste lands in their own or neighbouring villages". These were *pahikashta* only in name but represented the combination of the village headman (*mandal*) with some rich and turbulent peasant groups<sup>39</sup>. It is therefore necessary to test the validity of these views and to examine the nature of the *pahikashta* cultivator after the famine.

### The *pahikashta* peasant after 1770: a rich peasant class?

The evidence regarding the relationship between the *najai* tax and the further debilitation of the *khudkashta* peasants after 1769/70 is less clear than Sinha and Chaudhuri have suggested. Undoubtedly the tax was oppressive, being:

An assessment upon the actual inhabitants of every Inferior Description of the Lands; to make up for the loss sustained in the rents of their neighbours, who are either dead or have fled the country; it is a kind of Security against Desertion, by making the inhabitants thus mutually responsible for each other<sup>40</sup>.

Hastings also suggests that this tax was not a post-famine phenomenon, since it was "authorized by the antient [sic] and general usage of the country"; he also says that this tax was not oppressive in "ordinary cases, and while

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<sup>39</sup> Ray, 1979: 56-57.

<sup>40</sup> Warren Hastings, "The State of Bengal in 1784", in G.W. Forrest (ed.), 1910: 265.

the lands were in a state of cultivation"<sup>41</sup>. The existence of this tax and its apparent regressiveness after the famine would make the supposed advantage of the "vagrant" or the *pahikashta* peasant very difficult to envisage, if only for the fact that these groups were themselves *resident* peasants in some other area and the very logic of the *najai* tax was intended to restrict the scale of migration, or desertion, of precisely such peasants *even* under *normal* circumstances. Under a famine, when the pressure to restrain existing labour was at its greatest, the use of the *najai* operated as the greatest deterrent on the movement of *all* categories of peasants since they were now made "mutually responsible for each other"; and the intrinsic bias of such a tax was such that it could not possibly have left any particular category out of its clutches.

Moreover, *najai* does not appear to have been levied with the same effectiveness all over the province. Interestingly, this tax does not figure in the post-famine peasant leases (*pattas*) in Rajshahi, Jessore and Laskarpur<sup>42</sup>, even though they had suffered in varying degrees during the famine. Therefore, the influence of the *najai* on causing greater immiserization of the surviving peasantry cannot be established as an ascertained fact. Additionally, the scale of peasant desertion in the districts worst affected by the famine (see chapter 2) would certainly indicate that this tax was unable to stop peasants from fleeing when the pressures on them became unbearable.

The central issue in reconstructing the impact of the famine of 1769/70 is the state of the surviving peasantry. Essential to the consensual historiography of that event

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> For the absence of *najai* in the listed taxes of peasant *pattas* after the famine in Rajshahi see IOR, Home Misc., vol. 122, pp. 767-68; in Jessore, see Ibid., 765-66; and in Laskarpur see CCR, IOR P/67/57, 23 June 1773.

are three elements (a) that the famine had decimated ten million, or one-third, of Bengal's population, (b) the ensuing demand for labour meant that those who survived were in a position to bargain for better terms and (c) recovery from the famine required immense amounts of capital which was available, not from the local landed-proprietors and merchants, but from a class of rich peasants. The discussion (in chapter 2) has shown that the figures of famine-mortality are greatly exaggerated. The temporal and spatial sweep of that famine at best allows a death-toll of 2 million people. This fact must therefore place serious doubts on the extent to which there was a real shortage of labour on a provincial scale.

There is nevertheless some evidence to show that there was a certain movement towards *pahikashta* cultivation after the famine. Such peasants could be seen moving from one *talluqa* to another in Rangpur obviously in search of a better financial deal<sup>43</sup>. In Rajshahi, the use of *pahikashta* peasants in *zamindari* lands was being actively encouraged by the state on grounds that such strategies would "increase industry and population by every possible encouragement and indulgence"<sup>44</sup>. The fact that these peasants also enjoyed a slightly better financial position than the resident ones, at least in Eastern Bengal, is borne out from table 4 below which shows the comparative assessment of revenue (*jama*) on the *khudkashta* and *pahikashta* peasants in the *zamindari* of Laskarpur between 1770/71 and 1772/73.

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<sup>43</sup> BDR, Rangpur, vol.1, 23 June 1770.

<sup>44</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol.5, from Boughton-Rouse to Committee, 4 June 1771.

Table 4

Jama of *khudkashta* and *pahikashta* cultivators in Laskarpur,  
1770/71 and 1772/73 (rupees per bigha)

	1770/71	1771/72	1772/73
<i>Khudkashta jama</i>	4.69	5.94	7.59
<i>Pahikashta jama</i>	4.51	5.75	7.36

Source:CCR, IOR P/67/57, 9 July 1773

Table 4 does show that after the famine the *pahikashta* cultivators were relatively better off, but only marginally so; but this table also shows that these peasants were not free from subsequent increases made to the *jama* and this raises several questions about the existing consensus among historians regarding such cultivators after the famine. The common understanding that these *pahikashtas* were at a greater advantage after 1770, therefore, no longer appears feasible, and this is so for a number of reasons.

First, it is not at all clear whether the differential rates of assessment which supposedly made the *pahikashta* right attractive to the "vagrant" peasant actually prevailed all over Bengal. Unfortunately, not much is known about this right in the immediate aftermath of the famine, but subsequent notices in the sources suggest that this advantage may not have been as universal as is believed. The *pahikashta raiyat* in Burdwan and Birbhum appear to have enjoyed such privileges<sup>45</sup>, but in Murshidabad the position was absolutely different. Here the term *khudkashta* was used to designate those peasants who cultivated "without a patta and paid below official rates [of revenue]", and the *zamindars* often had to enforce his traditionally sanctioned

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<sup>45</sup> See BRC, IOR P/51/21, 20 May 1788 for Burdwan, and BRP, IOR P/71/24, 15 April 1790 for Birbhum.

right (*raj-ul-mulk*) to coerce them to pay "the full rates", or to settle *pahikashta* on other lands since they not only paid these "full rates", but also agreed to fulfil whatever *rasad* (increases in assessment) which the *zamindar* chose to introduce<sup>46</sup>. In Nadia, lands which had fallen out of cultivation (*lokshan-jote*) were "taken possession of indiscriminately... by Ryotts of almost every denomination at the commencement of cultivation"<sup>47</sup>. Obviously, the *pahikashta* were given no advantages there. In Dinajpur, the *pahikashta* cultivators were subject to a "double claim", those from the *zamindar* where they held *khudkashtkari* rights, and those imposed by the *zamindars* in their *pahikashta* lands; these peasants, therefore, "are seldom able, or at least willing to pay both", and in matters of dispute the *zamindars* in their original villages "have preference"<sup>48</sup>.

Moreover, the evidence from Burdwan suggests that the position of the *pahikashta* cultivators appear to have undergone a fairly substantial change between the 1770s and the 1780s. In the late 1780s these peasants in Burdwan were considered "the Ryotts of a Superior Rank that neither pay rent for their dwelling house, nor do they pay so high a revenue for their lands as the *khudkasht*"<sup>49</sup>, but in the mid-1770s they were those who were merely "exempted from some of the abwabs or additional taxes to which the *Khudkasht* are subject"; nor could the non-resident cultivator move about at will. Like the *khudkashta*, he was subject to *zamindari* imposed restrictions on peasant mobility; the only exception was made in the case of those peasants who had a *joteiccha patta* (cultivating at will)

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<sup>46</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/22, 21 December 1786.

<sup>47</sup> Brit. Mus., Add. Ms., 29076, f. 3.

<sup>48</sup> WBSA, PCR, Dinajpur, vol. 8, 17 June 1777.

<sup>49</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/21, 16 July 1788.



which allowed the peasant "the liberty to relinquish his ground when he chuses [sic]", and this *patta* was also available to the *khudkashta* cultivator<sup>50</sup>. It was also a practice in the 1770s for small revenue farmers (*qutquinadars*) to sub-divide their farms "in small portions to ryautts [sic] *who are generally inhabitants of the lands they farm*"<sup>51</sup>, and who thus become in a manner perpetual proprietors"<sup>52</sup>.

The second reason for doubting the ubiquity of the *pahikashta* right and also its connections with the creation of a "class" of rich peasants comes from the district of Birbhum where the thrust of reclamation and of settling cultivators on deserted lands was guided by a range of customary codes and regulations which actually favoured the resident cultivator, even when they had deserted. This fact is revealed in two such regulations:

1. A deserted ryott on his return shall be entitled to his lands again, & if he declines to reengage for the whole, he shall be entitled to such parts as he will engage to cultivate at an adequate jummah provided that he takes a proportion of the bad land with the good, if any come under the first denomination.
2. If the lands of a deserted Ryot having been divided between established Ryots holding & cultivating other lands and new Ryots, and should a contest subsequently arise for the possession of the whole of the deserted Ryots land, then the *established* Ryots cultivating such lands *shall have preference*<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> WBSA, PCR Burdwan, vol.1, 20 June 1774.

<sup>51</sup> This was the distinctive feature of *khudkashta* cultivation.

<sup>52</sup> WBSA, PCR, Burdwan, vol.15, 22 June 1776; emphasis added.

<sup>53</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/41, 18 January 1788; emphasis added.

Ray's suggestion that the *pahikashta* cultivators were mostly the rich peasants in disguise who used the famine to usurp the surplus land that was suddenly thrown up erroneously assumes that all such lands were equally productive. Quite often the most productive lands were held by the *zamindars* as their personal (*nij-jote* or *khamar*) holdings which were extensively cultivated by the use of sharecroppers<sup>54</sup>. The distribution of the rest of the village lands was determined as follows:

In each village are lands of the first, second, third and fourth sorts. At the time of the cultivation, the Ryotts examine the sort of land, agree to a jummah and take out a pottah. The rates of the first sort are the largest, of the second less. This has always been the custom of the Province<sup>55</sup>.

The evidence regarding the modes of reclamation in Birbhum (cited above) also suggests that reclaimers, or returning peasants, were expected to take "bad" (i.e. less productive) lands with the "good". It is perhaps more reasonable to suggest that the extension of *pahikashta* rights after the famine was a device framed by the *zamindars* to improve the state of cultivation by allowing peasants to have access to lands of varying productivity; and those who accepted such rights were either the displaced poor<sup>56</sup> from other districts looking for less

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<sup>54</sup> Datta, 1989: 87-89.

<sup>55</sup> WBSA, PCR Burdwan, vol.15, 22 June 1776.

<sup>56</sup> It is perhaps significant that *pahikashta* cultivators in Dinajpur were used primarily on lands producing *boro* rice which was an inferior and intermediate crop produced between the two of the major (the winter and spring) harvests (WBSA, PCR, Dinajpur, vol.8, 17 August 1777).

burdensome taxes<sup>57</sup>, or they came from the same village moving laterally from their previously held rights as *khudkashta*. Such indeed was the case in Burdwan where we are told of a peasant category called *nij-gaon paikasht*, or those "who cultivate the land of their own village" as *pahikashta raiyat*<sup>58</sup>. Individual peasants combined *pahikashta* and *khudkashta* rights in the *zamindari* of Rajshahi<sup>59</sup>.

Nevertheless these peasants became the source of friction between different *zamindars*, the best example of which is the tension between the Rajas of Burdwan and Birbhum after the flood-famine of 1788. As the river Ajoy breached embankments and flooded Burdwan, large numbers of peasants fled to the neighbouring *zamindari* of Birbhum which suffered less from the floods in 1787. The *zamindar* of Burdwan subsequently demanded the return of these cultivators on grounds that they were the settled resident-cultivators (*khudkashta*) of his *zamindari*, and were therefore obliged to cultivate land and pay revenue in Burdwan. The counter-claim proffered by the *zamindar* of Birbhum was that these migrants had acquired the legal status of non-resident peasants (*pahikashta*) in his lands, and were therefore entitled to stay and cultivate land in his *zamindari*<sup>60</sup>. This conflict is significant in so far as it shows the concern of the *zamindars* to the flight of labour from their lands, and indicates the existence of a favourable land-person ratio in which such flights took place. Additionally, it also reflects the geographical

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<sup>57</sup> See BRC, IOR P/49/39, 26 March 1773 for the situation in Rangpur where "the poorer riotts" constantly moved about from "one tallook to another" in search of slightly better terms.

<sup>58</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/21, 16 July 1788.

<sup>59</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/51, 1 March 1775.

<sup>60</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/21, 4 June 1788; and *ibid.*, P/51/34, 8 April 1789.

mobility of labour in the late eighteenth century.

Yet, there is very little reason to believe that this mobility served to enhance the economic standards of such peasants in the long-term, or that they represented an improved bargaining power of labour. First, these peasants moved solely because of their scanty resources. Thus the *pahikashta* of Sylhet,

Have no hereditary habitations, nor are attached to their native home; their dwelling consists of a wretched hovel which together with their families they move at pleasure, and a pergunna covered with small villages today often appears depopulated the next<sup>61</sup>.

Second, in many cases these peasants were only used seasonally; nor was their use always extensive, even in those districts which had suffered in 1769/70. In Rokunpur, *pahikashta jama* was a mere 11.6 percent of the *raiyaati jama* in 1778<sup>62</sup>. In Dhaka, *pahikashta* cultivators were used in *zamindari* lands principally for the winter harvest after which "they return to their own homes"<sup>63</sup>. The evidence from Dhaka is corroborated by that from Commilla where the *pahikashta* cultivators would come and go from the "surrounding pergunnas" but did not have any land or homesteads in Commilla<sup>64</sup>. Additionally, there was no guarantee that a *pahikashta* would be given the most productive or fertile land to cultivate. In fact the evidence from Birbhum (cited above) forcefully indicates that they were a given land of mixed qualities. In Tirhut, these cultivators were

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, P/52/5, Part 4, 24 November 1787.

<sup>62</sup> *Raiyaati Jama*: 3,65,090 rupees. *Pahikashta jama*: 42,359 rupees [Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 29087, f.136].

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., P/53/58, 23 October 1798.

<sup>64</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/45, 1 August 1788.

invariably made to "cultivate waste or fallow lands"<sup>65</sup>. Quite often they were given lands of the "second or third quality" since the most fertile spots were already occupied by the resident and the "superior" cultivators<sup>66</sup>.

Third, the use of *pahikashta* even on an extensive scale did not necessarily lead to the decline in the position of the resident peasantry. Evidence from western Bengal suggests that these *pahikashtas* cultivated a fraction of the agricultural land. In Burdwan these cultivators accounted for the cultivation of "near one fourth of the pergunah" in 1793<sup>67</sup>. In Birbhum there numbers were much less: only 73,000 *bighas* of land were actually tilled by these peasants there in 1791<sup>68</sup>. Compared to this, the scale of *pahikashta* cultivation appears to have been more extensive in the east. In Commilla, for instance, these peasants cultivated "near half the lands" in 1788<sup>69</sup>, but their utilization was at best seasonal and did not amount to giving them a privileged position among the peasants. The description of these peasants from Sylhet (cited above) does strongly suggest that they were essentially the poorer peasants trying to supplement their incomes. In Burdwan, the *pahikashta* were sub-divided in to various categories. There were those, called *thika pahikashta* who "undertake for a certain quantity of land at a fixed rate"; in contrast were those, called *comar [khamar] pahikashta*, who were essentially sharecroppers being used on a *zamindar's* personal holdings called

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<sup>65</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/65, 10 March 1786.

<sup>66</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/48, 18 January 1792.

<sup>67</sup> BRC, IOR P/53/8, 15 November 1793.

<sup>68</sup> BRP/IOR P/71/41, estimate of Asad-ul-Zaman Khan, *zamindar* of Birbhum provided to the Collector, 25 July 1791.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., P/70/45, 1 August 1788.

*khamar*<sup>70</sup>. Existing agricultural practices and norms also ensured that the rights of the settled cultivators were protected, and in many cases *pahikashta* and *khudkashta* rights were jointly held by individual peasants. Finally, *pahikashtas* were also used by the *khudkashta* peasants on terms closely resembling those offered to the sharecropper. Thus in Birbhum, "*the Khoodkasht Ryotts do not plough the land themselves, but cultivate them by means of Kersaans [peasants] from elsewhere [who are] daily labouring husbandmen who receive one third share of the crops as recompense for their labour*"<sup>71</sup>. The evidence regarding the *pahikashta* strongly suggests that they could at best have represent a *horizontal* movement from one peasant category to another and not the upward mobility of a "rich" peasant "class" in the making.

Jotedari in the late eighteenth century: some emerging trends

Much of the discussions of *jotedari* in the eighteenth century centred around three districts of eastern Bengal (Jessore, Rangpur and Dinajpur). Interestingly this term is specifically used almost exclusively in connection with Jessore where there appears to have been a systematic attempt to extend cultivation in the late eighteenth century, and the other term used almost synonymously with *jotedari* is *ganthidar*<sup>72</sup>. In either case the terms were used specifically to denote a lease granted by *zamindars* to individuals to bring stipulated portions of land back into

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<sup>70</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/63, 2 August 1776.

<sup>71</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/41, 25 July 1791; emphasis added.

<sup>72</sup> See, BRC, IOR P/51/22, 25 June 1788.

cultivation at concessional terms of revenue. A *jote* "properly so called is granted to a ryott for purposes of bringing deserted land back into cultivation at rates usually fixed at half the assessment on such lands"<sup>73</sup>, whereas *ganthis* were *pattas* [leases] "granted by *zamindars*, and sometimes by farmers (*ijaradars*) but confirmed by the *zamindar* to... perpetual leaseholders (*ganthidars*) for entire villages..."<sup>74</sup>. In either case the grantor was the *zamindar* who did so with the *dual purpose of raising money and expanding the long-term productive capacity of the zamindari*, and these tenures often co-existed with other sub-tenurial arrangements made at the *zamindar's* discretion in his personal (*khamar* or *nij-jot*) lands.<sup>75</sup>

The active role of the *zamindars* in the formation of such tenures can be seen in the creation of the *gutcdari* tenure in Purnea. These *gutcdars* were lease holders similar to the *jotedars* of Jessore and undertook to cultivate stipulated tracts of uncultivated land (*gutch*) partly by the use of their own and their families labour, and the rest by sharecroppers (*adhiars*). The crucial factor in determining the *gutcdar's* tenure was the *zamindar*, always bargaining for more remunerative terms by procuring rival offers for *gutcdari*. Quite frequently "the zemindar not being satisfied... requires a higher rent than the gutcdar is willing to undertake, and the gutcdarry is relinquished in consequence; the zemindar if unable to provide another tenant, then engages with his under ryotts on the gutch..."<sup>76</sup>

A *zamindar's* financial consideration was the prime

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<sup>73</sup> BRC, IOR P/53/55, 16 Jan. 1798.

<sup>74</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/17, 12 Jan. 1793.

<sup>75</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/22, 25 June 1788.

<sup>76</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, from H.T. Colebrooke to Board 26 April 1790.

mover in the evolution of the *jotedari patta*; the other consideration was the desire of an individual *zamindar* to concentrate agricultural production in relatively larger holdings as a device to ensure better monetary returns in the face of a rigid revenue demand and falling real incomes engendered by high prices and periodic harvest failures<sup>77</sup>. The creation of *jotes* and *ganthis* was deemed to represent "clear profits to the proprietor" since the lands where such tenures were created produced nothing before<sup>78</sup>. *Ganthidars*,

hold considerable farms in the villages and pergunnas... cultivating the major part of these lands by their own gauntee [*ganthi*] ryotts, and by that means the zemindar *collects almost as much revenue upon these lands thus united as he would were [these] lands held by separate persons...*<sup>79</sup>

For the East India Company the creation of *jotedaris* on concessional terms of revenue was not an entirely desirable prospect as "the more *jotes* there are in a cultivated state the less rent it [sic] affords"<sup>80</sup>. This viewpoint was that of a state bent on extracting the maximum possible from the agrarian economy; it was not necessarily shared by the *zamindars* who, regardless of the state's fears, persisted in creating *jotes*, *ganthis* and *gutchedaris* within their territories. By the late 1780s, Jessore was said to have "not a single pergunnah free from lands of this

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<sup>77</sup> These considerations seemed to have motivated the *zamindars* of Jessore [BRP, IOR P/51/22, 25 June 1788] and Birbhum [Ibid, IOR P/70/41, 18 Jan. 1788].

<sup>78</sup> BRC, IOR P/53/55, 16 January 1798.

<sup>79</sup> IOR, BRC P/51/22, 23 July 1788, p. 121; emphasis added.

<sup>80</sup> BRC, IOR P/53/55, 16 January 1798.



description"<sup>81</sup> .

The other factors which influenced the shape and size of such tenures in the eighteenth century were the existing land-labour ratio, the extent of reclaimable land available within a *zamindari* and the nature of the *zamindari* in which such tenures were patterned. They also influenced the extent to which such holders could improve their positions *vis a vis* the *zamindar* at one level and the inferior cultivators at the other. The suggestion that the *jotedars* were powerful in "regions characterized by substantial landholders owing their landed position largely to their role in the reclamation process"<sup>82</sup> needs re-examination. In 24-Parganas<sup>83</sup>, which had no substantial landholders<sup>84</sup>, we find evidence of holders of reclaiming leases (*patitabad patta*) undertaking to cultivate 32650 acres (97950 *bigha*) of waste land in 1779<sup>85</sup>. Chaudhuri's statement would also not apply to areas like Rangpur and Purnea which were generally recognized as being held by a number of small *zamindars*<sup>86</sup> and where the formation of tenures similar to

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<sup>81</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/22, 25 June 1788.

<sup>82</sup> Chaudhury, 1984: 118.

<sup>83</sup> This area was situated southward of Calcutta and was therefore in close proximity of its urban pull. After having undergone what appears to have been a phase of agricultural contraction during the early eighteenth century [Letters Received from Bengal, IOR/4/24, 31 December 1758] it was experiencing a fairly rapid reclamation during the latter part of the century.

<sup>84</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/70, Minute of Warren Hastings dt. 18 April 1777.

<sup>85</sup> CCR, IOR P/72/2, 30 September 1779. The land taken up for reclamation in 1779 amounted to nearly 21.53% of the total cultivated [*hasil*] land, 151601.3 acres [454804 *bigha*] in 1758 [Letters Received, IOR E/4/24, p. 96].

<sup>86</sup> The districts of Rangpur and Purnea, lying in the frontiers of the province, were *faujdari* areas under the Mughals and the Nawabs of Bengal. These were held by a number of small *zamindars* whose affairs were supervised by  
(continued...)

that of the *jotedari* can be traced in the eighteenth century. In Purnea, the *gutchedari* expanded in the wake of the famine of 1770 which is said to have wiped out nearly one-third of its agricultural population and converted nearly a similar quantity of agricultural land into cultivable waste<sup>87</sup>. In some *parganas* of Rangpur (like Bodah and Patcoom), small *zamindars* "permit a reclamer to cultivate as much land as he chuses [sic] upon a large plain, for which he pays a fixed rent per annum..."<sup>88</sup>.

In a large *zamindari*, where the estate belonged to a single and traditionally powerful *zamindar*, the extent to which such reclaimers could go to was determined not only by the financial necessities of the landholder, but also by the customary sanctions regulating the cultivation of waste or deserted lands. For instance in the *zamindari* of Birbhum, the nature of reclamation and therefore the hold of the reclaimers appear to have been influenced by two customary practices, the details of which have been provided earlier in this discussion. The first was the stipulation that reclaimers paying concessional rates had to forego their lands on the original holder's return, who was then to have the lands restored at the "former jummah" (original rate of assessment) which he paid prior to his desertion. The second was the enduring rule that the *established* peasants were to have preference in cases of disputes between them and "new ryotts" coming from

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<sup>86</sup>(...continued)

a military-bureaucratic official [*faujdar*] who was also responsible for pacifying the frontiers of the province. In striking contrast were the districts like Birbhum, Burdwan, Nadia (in western Bengal) Dinajpur and Rajshahi (in the eastern parts) which were recognized as substantial *zamindari* areas where the state had to pattern different administrative arrangements [cf. James Grant "Historical Analysis of the Finances of Bengal, 1789" in *FR* 2 ].

<sup>87</sup> WBSA, CCRM, 5 December 1771, p.109; BRP, IOR P/71/26, 18 June 1790.

<sup>88</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/27, 8 May 1787.

elsewhere.

Such customary codes were not typical of the larger *zamindaris* alone, nor were they limited of Birbhum. It was natural for all categories of landholders to attempt to protect the interests of peasants who had settled to cultivate on long-term leases<sup>89</sup>. The Amini Commission [1778] clearly stated that the *khudkashta's* "right of possession whether it arises from an actual property in the soil, or from length of occupancy, *is considered stronger than of the other ryotts* [even though] they generally pay the highest Rent for the Lands they hold"<sup>90</sup>. The tendency to have resident peasants cultivating on *muqarrari* (permanent) tenures was a norm closely followed in *zamindaris* all over the province<sup>91</sup>. The case of Rangpur provides a revealing example of this tendency. Here the *muqarrari* tenure seems to have achieved greater stability between the 1770s and the 1780s. In 1778, these tenures were made to "pay the rent of no more land than the Ryott cultivates [but] a measurement is made by the zemindar once a year, and the land found to be in cultivation is re-assessed"; by 1787, the same tenure was paying "a fixed rent pr. annum, subject to no taxes whatsoever... nor will [the peasant] suffer the zemindar to measure his land"<sup>92</sup>. By 1807, a *muqarrari raiyat* had become vested not only with perpetual

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<sup>89</sup> See for instance, BRP, IOR P/71/25, 28 May 1790; Robert Kyd, "Some Remarks on the Soil and Cultivation on the Western Side of the River Hooghly" MS.Eur.F.95, f.58; F. Buchanan "Account of Ronggopur", IOL MS.Eur.D.75, vol.4, book 2, ff.98-100; "State of Bengal in 1786: A Report Compiled by Mr. Beaufoy" IOL Home Misc. vol.382, p.78.

<sup>90</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol.206, p.350; emphasis added.

<sup>91</sup> For *muqarrari raiyat* in Bengal see, Amini Report, IOR, Home Misc., vol.206, p.350; IOR, BRC, P/50/10, 3 July 1778; IOR, BRP, P/70/26, 13 April 1787; Ibid., P/70/30, 22 June 1787; Ibid., P/70/41, 6 May 1788; Ibid., P/72/17, 19 June 1793.

<sup>92</sup> Compare, BRC, IOR P/50/10, 3 July 1778 and BRP, IOR P/70/27, 8 May 1787.

possession, but also with the right to sell and transfer the lease, though the previous [1778] *zamindari* power to measure and re-assess such lands had once again been restored<sup>93</sup>.

The obvious rationale behind the establishment of such permanent peasant tenures was the *zamindars* need for steady incomes which was possible only by ensuring a definite permanency of agricultural production. This need became more pressing because of the two severe famines (and a number of dearth years) which Bengal suffered after 1765. In such situations reclaimers could only hold on to the lands of their choice, or increase their holdings, not by their intrinsic economic or social power, but by conniving with *zamindari* officials at the village level<sup>94</sup>, or by appealing to the *zamindar* to apply his discretionary powers on their behalf.<sup>95</sup>

The *jotedari*, therefore, far from being a relation of power and economic domination from its very inception was, on the contrary, a mutually acceptable arrangement between two classes in agrarian society to improve their respective economic positions, and in which it was the *zamindar* who really determined the pace, and the extent, of the *jotedars'* development. There is very little evidence to suggest significant alterations in this arrangement at least up to the first half of the nineteenth century.

Turning to the economic side of these reclaimed lands we find the following picture. Since reclamation involved

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<sup>93</sup> Hamilton, "Ronggoppur", IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 4, f. 100. The reason for *zamindari* laxity in 1787 may lie in the massive flood in that year which perhaps forced them to make temporary concessions.

<sup>94</sup> Thus in Rajshahi, reclaimers operated by paying "bribes to the Putwaree, Halsanah & Cutwals of the villages [all *zamindari* revenue officials], the connivance of all of whom is differently necessary for them" (BRP, IOR P/70/26, 31 March 1787).

<sup>95</sup> This was a marked feature of the *gutcdari* tenure in Purnea, see Ibid., P/71/26, 18 June 1790.

relatively large amounts of capital and a substantial deployment of labour, a *jotedari* had to ensure fair returns on both to be a viable enterprise. A part of the capital costs involved were reimbursed by the nature of such tenures. They were initially given at nominal rates of assessment (usually fixed at half the normal *jama* on lands of comparable qualities) and the reclaimers always attempted to get these originally favourable terms frozen for as long as possible<sup>96</sup>. The organization of production was predominantly sharecropping, with the reclaimer providing the necessary financial investment and the sharecropper contributing the necessary labour. The division of the crop was the sphere where the *jotedar* used his superior bargaining position in order to take more than the agreed proportion of the harvest, usually half, as his share. This was achieved by the coercive strategy of counting the advances of seed or money to the sharecropper, not as an advance of capital but as a loan on which a high rate of interest was charged<sup>97</sup>. When paid in cash, the sharecropper faced the following situation:

The usual money advanced is 6 rupees; and this is called a year's wages...; but in fact the term for which he labours is always extended beyond a year, and from 1 to 10 months are added for interest, according to the proportion between the number of employers and those who consent to take service"<sup>98</sup>.

Control over labour was also maintained by another device, mainly administrative in nature, which was dele-

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<sup>96</sup> For Rajshahi, BRP, IOR P/70/26, 31 March 1787; for Jessore, BRC, IOR P/70/26, 16 January 1798; for Bakarganj, Beveridge, 1876: 194.

<sup>97</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, 26 April 1790.

<sup>98</sup> Buchanan, "Ronggoppur", f.112.

gated by the *zamindar* to the reclaimer as another incentive for extending cultivation. This was the right to grant *pattas* to the subordinate *raiyyat*. In Jessore, for instance, the *pattas* granted by the *ganthidars* to the cultivators were adhered to by the *zamindar* and the revenue-farmer (*ijaradar*) even when the *ganthidar* had vacated his lease<sup>99</sup>.

But the *jotedars* were not alone in shaping the first forms of *bargadari* in Bengal. The *zamindars* used sharecroppers with equally exploitative zeal on their own lands. Nor did the modes of coercion used by the *jotedars* lead to their ubiquitous domination over all cultivators within the lands they reclaimed. In Jessore, peasants described as *khas raiyyat* were not subject to the *jotedar* or the *ganthidar*; they dealt directly with the *zamindar*, a privilege they enjoyed because of their being the "ancient Ryotts" of the *zamindari* who paid "unchanging rents for many generations"<sup>100</sup>. In Rajshahi, a peasant category called *khush bash* (residing at pleasure) were allowed easier terms and permitted to pay a mutually negotiated amount both by the *zamindar* and by the reclaiming leaseholder<sup>101</sup>. In Bakarganj the original reclaimers (*abadkars*), the first phase of reclamation being over, seldom interfered with the way in which the subordinate holders managed their cultivation. This resulted in a proliferation of sub-tenurial rights engineered by the cultivators themselves<sup>102</sup>. Finally in Birbhum where the *pahikashta* had to compete with the resident cultivators for better terms of revenue, reclaimers were often hard hit in their efforts to maintain a close control over labour in their enter-

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<sup>99</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/17, 12 January 1793.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/26, 31 March 1787.

<sup>102</sup> Beveridge, 1876: 194-96.

prises<sup>103</sup>.

The *jotedar* of the eighteenth century was not a "village landlord", nor was he a "kulak-landlord". It was a recognized fact that even those holding less than 10 *bighas* (3.3 acres) of land could get *jotedari pattas* from the *zamindar*<sup>104</sup>. This would make the *jotedars* of the eighteenth century at best "middling" peasants who had been able to collect sufficient resources to enable them to invest in reclamation using the labour of those who were less favoured. The resources they had may have arisen from their being able to save during favourable agricultural seasons or from profitable sales of their produce. These could also emerge from colluding with the *zamindari* official in order to juggle their own revenue accounts. The overwhelming portion of these resources however came from the "profits" they made during the distribution of the product between them and the sharecroppers. But "accumulation" of such resources should however not be taken to imply that an individual *jotedar* could manage to extend his *jotedari* unchecked, or that he could create a new power configuration in society.

It was the *zamindar's* interest which determined the boundaries of the *jotedari* in the last instance. Moreover, none of the *jotes* were extensive enough to conjure visions of "large farms" being managed by a "kulak"-type farmer. Very rarely did individual *jotedars* take leases of farms beyond the supervisory capacity of one person<sup>105</sup>. This limitation would tend to make the eighteenth century *jotedari* an agglomeration of small or medium sized leases,

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<sup>103</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/41, 18 January 1788.

<sup>104</sup> This tendency was noticed in Jessore [BRC, IOR P/51/22, 23 July 1788, p.133]. Ray also noted that "even a poor peasant holding five acres on a direct lease from the zamindar could describe himself as a jotedar" [1979: 54] but failed to note the contradiction between this and the crux of her thesis that *jotedars* were "village landlords".

<sup>105</sup> Buchanan, 'Ronggopur', IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 4, f. 103.

designed by the *zamindars* to bring about an extension of cultivation, and to concentrate production in the hands of those people who had relatively larger funds at their disposal when compared to the poor peasants and the artisans. This is not to say that the *jotedar-bargadar* relationship was not viciously exploitative; but it was not a mode of exploitation which differed substantially from those prevailing in *zamindari* areas or the ones shaped by the merchants in their dealings with the poor peasant. Nor had the *jotedars* been able to create the necessary conditions for the displacement of the *zamindar's* power from the matrix of rural society. Such displacements, and the techniques of replacement had to wait till the middle of the nineteenth century before being realized.

#### Sharecropping in the eighteenth century

The use of sharecroppers by *jotedars* and *zamindars* necessitates an explanation of this tenure in the eighteenth century. I have shown that it is difficult to interpret *bargadari* or *adhiari* in this period either in terms of "untouchability" or of "landlessness". My suggestion is that sharecropping in the eighteenth century arose from the needs of the poorer peasants to ensure the reproduction of their household-based economies in the face of scanty resources, famines (and other crises of subsistence) and the state's revenue demand. Nor can the existence of sharecropping justify the use of the term "semi-feudal"<sup>106</sup> to describe a social formation in which sharecroppers are used, even if the use is on an extensive scale. Martinez-Alier's study of labour-contracts and labour arrangements on the Spanish *latifundia* shows that

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<sup>106</sup> As used by Ray and Ray, 1975.



sharecropping is not *necessarily* incompatible *even* with capitalist relations of production and appropriation<sup>107</sup>. Sharecropping was one of the tenurial arrangements which evolved during the *transition* from feudalism to capitalism in West Europe<sup>108</sup>, and (as in Spain, Italy and France) it co-existed with the capitalist-farmer and peasant-"proletariat"<sup>109</sup>.

I am not suggesting that sharecropping in eighteenth century Bengal was a sign of the growth of agrarian capitalism in Bengal. It was nevertheless an arrangement for the appropriation of *absolute* surplus-product in a small-peasant, petty-commodity producing economy. The extent to which *bargadari* or *adhiari* was a new tenurial relation in the eighteenth century is a point which cannot be resolved owing to the scarcity of information of the situation in previous centuries; but as a relation of appropriation<sup>110</sup> it certainly contained the features which were to become *generalized* in the nineteenth century.

As a relation of production, sharecropping entailed a specific relation between investment and labour, and between investment and redistribution. It required the investment of the necessary productive resources by a

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<sup>107</sup> Martinez-Alier, 1971.

<sup>108</sup> Marx, 1981: 939.

<sup>109</sup> Carlo M. Cipolla, 1981: 114. Kautsky saw no contradiction between the economic concentration in the *latifundium*, the existence of tenant-farming (and sharecropping) and the emergence of capitalist relations in agriculture: 'the latifundium, not the enormous growth of the individual farm, is the form in which the modern *giant enterprise* develops in agriculture: and like the centralization of capital this form *also* acknowledges no limits' [Kautsky, 1988: 153-58, esp. 156; emphasis added].

<sup>110</sup> Pertev [1986: 47] sees in sharecropping a better system of surplus *maximization* from small peasant-proprietors than a wage system in agricultural production.

social group and the labour power by another<sup>111</sup>. "The ryotts who cultivate these lands are generally supplied with money by the zamindars to *provide seed, implements of husbandry and for the immediate maintenance of their families...*"<sup>112</sup>. The division of the crop was based on a previously negotiated arrangement between the investor and the labourer. In Bengal the share appears to have ranged from one-third to one-half of the produce which remained *after* the costs of investment had been deducted<sup>113</sup> whereas in Bihar the proportion seems to have been 22.5 shares for the *zamindar* and 17.5 shares for the *adhiar* of the net produce notionally divided into 40 shares of equal quantities<sup>114</sup>. Other forms of division also prevailed. For instance in Burdwan and Bishnupur the *zamindar* or the "farmer [retained] the whole produce and [paid] a certain amount in money [to the sharecropper] calculated upon the price which the same article may bear in the adjacent markets"<sup>115</sup>. In this case the division of the crop was more than a *physical* parcellization of the produce after the harvest; it also entailed the conversion of the produce into cash which perhaps indicates the commercial dimension of sharecropping.

The documentation of the relations of appropriation in the sharecropping system is significant. In a situation where the share of the crop was not done "by an estimation of the crop valued at the market price, but by the actual division of the crop" the terms faced by the sharecropper were as follows:

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<sup>111</sup> BRC, P/52/10, 12 May 1790; BRP, IOR P/71/22, 20 March 1790.

<sup>112</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/40, 15 December 1792; emphasis added.

<sup>113</sup> Select Committee Consultations, IOR P/A/9, 16 August 1769, p. 493; Buchanan, "Account of Ronggopur" IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 4, f. 109.

<sup>114</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/40, 13 January 1792.

<sup>115</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/21, 20 May 1788, p. 1021.

1. No lease or written document was granted to the *adhial*. He cultivated on a verbal agreement.
2. There were a number of deductions made from the produce *previous* to the division of the crop between the *adhial* and the *zamindar* or the *gutcdar*. These were (a) "the quantity of seed sown returned *two-fold* to the person who furnished it", and (b) deductions to defray the costs of employing watchmen to "prevent the ryots from privately reaping the crops", for paying blacksmiths "for work done on the ploughs", for paying the weighman (*kayal*) for "measuring off the crop" and other incidental expenses to meet the costs of bringing in priests for making ritual sacrifices "for the mutual benefit of the tenant and the cultivator".
3. The costs of meeting the expenses in the category 2(b) ranged from 7.6 *seers* to 5.75 *seers* for every two maunds of grain produced (or between 9.5 and 7.18 percent of every two maunds)
4. "When the foregoing deductions have been made, the remainder of the produce is equally divided between the Gutcdar and the Addhea Ryott..."<sup>116</sup>

The act of treating the advances of working capital as a loan on which a two-fold rate of return was charged<sup>117</sup> made sharecropping an extension of the general prevalence of usury in the countryside. In situations where the *bargadar* was paid after the produce had been converted into cash, the farmer made sure of a profit from the seasonal variation in prices. The produce was sold immediately after the harvest when prices were at their lowest, while the

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<sup>116</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, from Henry Colebrooke in Purnea to Board of Revenue, 26 April 1790.

<sup>117</sup> In Rangpur the "head ryot give as much grain as may be necessary for the *perja* [sharecropper] for seed, and receive from him double the quantity when the crop is cut" [BRC, IOR P/52/10, 20 March 1790].

"contracts" were negotiated *before* the land was sown at prices which were at their peak in the seasonal swing<sup>118</sup>. The sharecropper invariably got a lot less in real terms owing to the seasonal shift in agricultural prices: "at the reaping of the harvest a very small part of it falls to the addhea ryott; but by the division the zemindars become possessors of the greater part of the produce of these lands"<sup>119</sup>. In Purnea the *zamindar* could "by these means draw without risque [sic] and expense on labour, four rupees from a bega [of land] for which he paid only a few annas"<sup>120</sup>.

This type of appropriation can partly be explained by the *economics* of interest-bearing capital<sup>121</sup>. But the element of *non-economic* coercion was ever present; it even dominated where sharecroppers were used by the *zamindars* to cultivate their *neez-talluqas*. In these lands the *zamindar* used his prescriptive social status to arbitrarily "tax the advances with an heavy interest" and/or "fraudulently" devalued "the market price of goods, or products of the land in which" the sharecropper was paid<sup>122</sup>. The following description of sharecropping in a *zamindar's khamar* is perhaps a revealing example of the modes of non-economic coercion which went into the making of sharecropping. The description comes from *pargana* Mandalghat, one of the revenue divisions in the extensive *zamindari* of Burdwan. The *zamindar* had farmed the *khamar* lands in this *pargana* to a small revenue-farmer (*qutquinadar*, also called *kutke-*

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<sup>118</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, 18 June 1790.

<sup>119</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/40, 13 January 1792.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, IOR P/51/6, 19 February 1790.

<sup>121</sup> As capital which is invested in the form of loans and which appropriates the surplus-product in the form of interest: "as value [possessing] the use-value of creating surplus-value or profit" [Marx, 1981: 464-65].

<sup>122</sup> SCC, IOR P/A/9, 16 August 1769.

*nadar*) and the situation was as follows:

In the kummar [*khamar*] lands it is the custom of the pergunnah for the Ryot to receive his share in the proportion of 9 in 20. With this equitable [sic] mode of distribution the Ryot would well be contented if it was faithfully adhered to, but the kutkennadar usually over-rates the produce by which means the Ryot is left with a very inadequate recompense for his labour. In addition to this imposition the *Ryot is obliged to pay in ready money such proportion of the crops as belong to the zemindar and kutkennadar*. He suffers another violent oppression by an arbitrary valuation. For example, if a Ryot has to pay for 100 maunds of rice & if agreeable to the price at which he sells it at the Bazaar [market] it produces 100 r[upee]s, the kutkennadar enhances the value of Rice by making the Ryot pay him back at the rate of 1 [rupee] for 32 seers by which the Ryot sustains a loss of 8 seers in every maund & is compelled to pay 125 [rupees] for rice which he could only sell for 100 Rupees<sup>123</sup>.

Additionally, physical force (confinement and flogging) was used by the *zamindars* to tilt the balance in their favour in case of disputed shares<sup>124</sup>. In essence, sharecropping in eighteenth century Bengal was the *commercial* exploitation of a small-holding peasantry having inadequate resources at their disposal. Also the fact that sharecroppers had to sell their produce in the *bazars prior* to paying the *zamindar* is a clear example of the commercial environment in which such tenures operated.

The existence of large numbers of sharecroppers in a situation of land abundance, and in a context where

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<sup>123</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/4, 6 July 1792; emphasis added.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., P/70/33, 13 September 1787.

absolute landlessness did not exist appears paradoxical. Yet the evidence from Rangpur and Dinajpur where 52 percent (in Rangpur) and 77 percent (in Dinajpur) of the agricultural population were sharecroppers *circa* 1807<sup>125</sup>, and the information cited above indicates that sharecropping was not only a major relation of agricultural production, it was almost certainly on the increase in our period. Who were these sharecroppers? Why did sharecropping become so prevalent in agricultural production?

As discussed above, the existence and increase of sharecropping in our period can not be explained either in terms of landlessness or in terms of the caste. The decision of a person to engage as a sharecropper was dictated entirely by the constraint of resources. The general insufficiency of land in individual peasant-households was the central resource constraint. The other pressure was the acute shortage of working capital. A good description of a peasant family in eastern Bengal in such circumstances was provided by J.H.Paterson from Commilla in 1789:

A poor riatt during the time he can spare from his field hires himself out as a labourer while his wife employs herself at home spinning cotton. A Riatt of this description can not afford to cultivate above 2 Cannees [5.5 acres]<sup>126</sup> of land at the farthest and to do that he must be allowed tuccavy [as] the produce of his lands without the above occasional resources could not maintain him especially if he has a family. He resides generally upon the lands of some other riatt as a part of his family by which he secures an exemption from the payment of any Bhitee Jama [tax on house]; and by

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<sup>125</sup> Buchanan, "Statistical Tables of Ronggopur", IOL, Ms. Eur., G.11, Table 30; Martin, 1976, vol.3: 906.

<sup>126</sup> 1 kani of land = 8 bigha, vide., WBSA, PCR Dacca, vol.15, p.360.

these aids he makes a shift from hand to mouth and pay the rent of his two Connies. *This class of riatts are by far the most numerous*<sup>127</sup>

This statement, in association with the state of the *adhiars* of Purnea and the *sanjhadars* of Burdwan (discussed above) must surely indicate large numbers of resource-constrained cultivators engaged as sharecroppers as a device to delay the prospects of protracted immiserization. Sharecropping, in other words, was a strategy of survival and of coping with continuous adversity by a majority of the small-peasants. The other important reason for necessitating such strategies was the cluster of famine and dearth years in the late eighteenth century. The impact of these years on agricultural production will be discussed in chapter 4. Briefly, a famine or a dearth put immense strains on the already meagre resources at the disposal of these peasants. Additionally, each cycle of adverse weather, or harvest failure, threw up a fresh crop of uprooted peasants. Land was abundantly available but the main problem was that of productive resources. The urban sector was unable to fruitfully absorb even a fraction of the displaced, thereby giving them no alternative but to stick to land as sharecroppers or agricultural labourers. Even though absolute landlessness was not a major agrarian problem of the late eighteenth century, the objective constraints on agricultural production nevertheless led to the creation of a sharecropping peasantry on a scale which can only be described as extensive.

The problem of sharecropping in our period can not therefore be explained in terms of unequal landholding and caste-based exploitation of a destitute peasantry. Sharecropping in the eighteenth century emerged out of the poor peasant's need to ensure the reproduction of their

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<sup>127</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 3 April 1789; emphasis added.

household-based economies in the face of scanty resources, crises of subsistence and the financial demands of the state. It is no accident that the "inferior ryotts" in Purnea, holding *insufficient* land, were *also* the *adhiars* there<sup>128</sup>. It is also significant that *zamindars* in Rangpur enticed these peasants to work as sharecroppers by providing the necessary advances of seed and implements in addition to small pieces of land "on which to reside and cultivate pulse" and vegetables "at a rent paid in money"<sup>129</sup>.

#### Peasant society and the village *mandal* (headman)

Historians who argue the existence of a "village oligarchy" in this period point to the increasing influence of the *mandal* in rural affairs as constituting the core of that oligarchy. These headmen are seen as the vehicles through which the "rich" peasants controlled the politics and external affairs of the village communities, often with violence, in order to increase their economic power inside the village. This "rich" peasant-*mandal* combination, it is argued, was thus able to get major financial concessions both from the local *zamindar* and from the state<sup>130</sup>. There are essentially two objections to this view. First, it argues that these headmen had become powerful all over the province. Second, this view does not consider the potent role of *zamindari* officials in the countryside. As will be discussed shortly, these officials were crucial in

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<sup>128</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/22, 22 March 1789.

<sup>129</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/10, 12 May 1790.

<sup>130</sup> These are in essence the principal arguments of Ratnalekha Ray, 1979: chapter 2; also Ray and Ray, 1975.



mediating the relations between the *zamindars'* *sadr* (headquarter) and the *muffassal*, and used their positions for their own advantage. The nature of the village *mandal* therefore needs to be analyzed.

According to the Amini Commission, the *mandal* in Mughal and Nawabi Bengal was also known as *muqaddam*. Though that Report described the *mandal* as the "chief ryott of the village", it is now well known that the *muqaddams* in north India were more like petty *zamindars* than peasants in the strict sense of persons who actually tilled the land by their own, and their domestic, labour<sup>131</sup>. In Bengal, the *mandal's* duties were:

To act as mediator between the Ryots and the petty collectors of revenue, to assist them [the cultivators] in selling their crops, and in raising money to pay their Rents, and to settle or accommodate the little disputes which arise in the neighbourhood.

These duties give a distinct impression that *mandals* of Bengal were village officials set up by the peasants themselves to manage their day to day affairs with the wider world. In fact they were "*chosen* from amongst the oldest or most intelligent inhabitants" and their "influence and services" depended "*solely* on the *good opinion of the Ryotts*". They could be removed by the *zami-ndar* in case they lost the "confidence" of the villagers<sup>132</sup>. The report of the Amini Commission (formed to survey the agrarian conditions in the aftermath of the famine of 1769/70, and submitted in 1778), must surely indicate that the principles initially established in the

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<sup>131</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 206, p. 35; Hasan, 1964; Grover, 1965; Habib, 1963.

<sup>132</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 206, p. 35; emphasis added.

seventeenth century, still guided the late eighteenth century *mandal*, at least in the *twenty* districts of the province actually visited by the members of that Commission<sup>133</sup>.

The notion that these *mandals* were essentially the richer peasants rests on the assumption that their holdings were larger than those held by the other cultivators. Unfortunately, there is very little evidence to support that. The following figures pertain to the lands held by 16 *mandals* in *pargana* Anwarpur, *zilla* Nadia in 1794. Here a total of 16 *mandals* possessed 289.45 *bighas* of land in the following fashion<sup>134</sup> :

Amount of land ( <i>bigha</i> )	Number of <i>mandals</i>
Below 10 <i>bigha</i>	1
From 10 to 20 <i>bigha</i>	9
From 20 to 30 <i>bigha</i>	4
Above 30 <i>bigha</i>	2

These figures are revealing in so far as they show a striking conformity to the general pattern of peasant land-holdings in the province. The fact that 10 out of 16 *mandals* held lands similar to those possessed by the "poorer ryotts" does not support the view which sees these people as the "rich" peasant in action.

Nevertheless, there is evidence to show that in certain districts these *mandals* had apparently become powerful. In 1788 the *mandals* of Rajshahi,

By making themselves the pretended guardians  
of the Ryotts have obtained an irregular and

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<sup>133</sup> Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 29086 to 29088; also Ramsbotham, 1926: 131-33; Chaudhuri, 1983: 300.

<sup>134</sup> BRC, IOR P/53/19, 14 May 1794.

very dangerous power, destructive of subordination, the remedy of the evils of which is very difficult. They can incite the Ryotts to commotion in an instant at pleasure, without appearing themselves, and by that means compel even the zemindaree power to bend to them<sup>135</sup>.

In Dinajpur, these people, along with the "principal inhabitants of the villages, under plea of real or fictitious desertions of the Riauts, have got into their possession considerable tracts of ground at an under-rated assessment... and the established rates or Nirk has become obsolete"<sup>136</sup>. In Birbhum, "the munduls derive from their number and mutual support such influence, that a success of a settlement in general measure... depends entirely on their pleasure"<sup>137</sup>. These descriptions form the crux for the historians who argue the formation of a "village oligarchy" and "powerful tenantry" in this period. The question is: do these descriptions actually support such formulations?. It is difficult to say that they do for the following reasons.

First, the timing of these descriptions is crucial. These depictions are without exception for the year 1788 which, as discussed in chapter 2, was a year of a major famine. Massive floods had ruined agricultural production in southern, northern and eastern Bengal. Peasants had been uprooted from land leading to a pressure on the landed-proprietors to make concessions. It is likely that a part of the pressure was created by the peasants bargaining for better terms, at least in the short-term. There is very little reason to believe that such pressures were due to the concerted actions of the "village oligarchy", or that they were necessarily a persistent feature of peasant

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<sup>135</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/29, 28 November 1788.

<sup>136</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/40, 11 April 1788.

<sup>137</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/20, 14 May 1788.

society. The evidence we have of the *pahikashta* cultivators certainly shows a picture quite contrary to the creation of "rich" peasantry in the long-term.

Second, these descriptions are spatially selective and are not confirmed by similar statements for other districts either before or after the famine of 1788. This is significant because it shows that the so-called "power" of the *mandals* was not a feature common in all areas, whether famine-stricken or famine-free. Third, the districts where the *mandals* had apparently managed to make good display certain similarities. As discussed above (and chapters 1 and 2) Birbhum, Rajshahi and Dinajpur had clearly moved downwards in economic terms during the late eighteenth century. They had declined from stable (and surplus) economic centres to areas of chronic instability and declining production during the course of the century. This may have caused some realignments in rural society in favour of the village headmen, though all indications show that these shifts were unlikely to effect major changes in social structure.

In general the *mandals* in the late eighteenth century continued to remain as "a kind of civil superior *elected* by the tribe over whom they respectively preside"<sup>138</sup>: a description which confirms the one provided by the Amini Commission in 1778. It is also significant that the power to dismiss them rested with the villagers and with the *zamindar*. The latter also had the right to confirm (or reject) the villagers' choice of a *mandal* who had to pay a "fixed tribute to the zemindars" to acquire the necessary confirmation. Apart from assisting the villagers in their day to day affairs, the *mandal* had to oversee "the conduct of the inferior members, chiefly to prevent any offence against their caste" and to be "present at all marriages and other civil or religious ceremonies", for which he

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<sup>138</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/16, 28 July 1790; emphasis added.

received a stipulated fee<sup>139</sup>. The exact amounts of such fees are not known, but revenue-free (*baz-i-zamin*) lands were sometimes given to meet the *mandals'* services. But these lands were not extensive enough to conjure up visions of a powerful village oligarchy in operation. In Birbhum, for instance, such lands amounted to 38.40 *bighas*, which constituted a mere 0.04 per cent of the total *baz-i-zamin* lands (96032.57 *bighas*) in 1789<sup>140</sup>.

Peasant stratification in Bengal and the elusive "rich" peasant

Peasant stratification in eighteenth century Bengal cannot therefore be explained in terms of massive differences in landholdings alone. The gap between the relatively rich and the comparatively poor was very small and any major calamity (like a flood or famine) could easily reduce the former into the ranks of the rural poor. The situation in Dinajpur, where Buchanan-Hamilton noted the existence of peasants holding 165 *bighas* of land was clearly an aberration and should not be taken as the crucial indicator of peasant stratification for the entire province, as has been done by Ray<sup>141</sup>. In the adjacent district of Rangpur peasants with 30 *bighas* of land were identified as the "superior ryotts" of that district in 1790<sup>142</sup>; in Dinajpur 30 *bighas* would classify a peasant as

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.; BR Misc., P/89/37, 1 April 1791.

<sup>140</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/13, 12 February 1788.

<sup>141</sup> Ray, 1979: 64.

<sup>142</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/10, 20 March 1790.

a "poor farmer"<sup>143</sup>. The peculiarity of Dinajpur can be explained by the silting up of its major riverain systems and the apparent economic contraction which this engendered<sup>144</sup>. Large "farms" may have been a device by people with resources to extend cultivation either at the behest of the *zamindars*, or by small peasants leasing out to their larger counterparts and then working their lands on a sharecropping basis. It must also be borne in mind that Buchanan-Hamilton's survey was undertaken around 1807, nearly fifteen years after the Permanent Settlement of revenue by the East India Company and the impact of this Act on land-relations has to be accounted for before accepting the situation there as representative of *pre-Permanent Settlement Bengal*.

Given the favourable land-labour ratio and the *general* smallness of peasant plots, it becomes almost difficult to find a connection between peasant stratification on the basis of unequal landholdings alone in the eighteenth century. The degree of wealth was associated more with the amount of resources at an individual's disposal and even the slightest variation in resources seems to have made the major difference between relative affluence and relative poverty in rural society. Peasant resources traditionally were measured in terms of draught animals and ploughs (and not by the amount of land held), and it is perhaps significant that persons having one or two ploughs were considered "poor" peasants whereas those possessing between 3 and 5 ploughs employed sharecroppers<sup>145</sup>. In Jessore, people with a mere 10 *bighas* (3.3 acres) could take *jote* from the *zamindars* and get them cultivated by *adhiars*<sup>146</sup>. "The circ-

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<sup>143</sup> M.Martin, 1976, vol.3: 906.

<sup>144</sup> See BRP, IOR P/70/42, 30 May 1788; WBSA, Grain, vol.1, 15 October 1794, p.202; BDR:Dinajpur, vol.2, n.367, p.231.

<sup>145</sup> Buchanan "Ronggopur" IOL Ms.Eur.D.75, vol.2, book 4, ff.101-3.

<sup>146</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/22, 23 July 1788.

umstances of a Ruatt (*raiyat*) are known by the number of ploughs he employs... but there are those who have no oxen, and who are obliged to hire a plough, either by money or work. Two ruatts who have two oxen are enabled to cultivate a *doon* (6.6 acres) *by joining their cattle and using them alternately...*" is a revealing description of small peasants working under a shortage of resources<sup>147</sup>.

The seemingly negative correlation between the formation of a richer peasantry and the concentration of land in a few hands makes the analysis of the rural poor extremely difficult. Ray and Ray attempt to resolve this problem by classifying the bulk of the agrarian population as the "untouchable landless groups in the villages"<sup>148</sup>, thereby equating poverty with caste and landlessness. There are a number of reservations against an explanation of this type. How would a caste-oriented explanation of rural poverty reconcile the existence of the *Muslim* poor in the eighteenth century? Similarly, the explanation of the upper strata in Bengal as a "high-caste local gentry" fails to resolve the issue of non-Hindu *zamindars* or that of the relatively affluent Muslim agriculturists of Bakarganj who sometimes held three or four separate rights on different lands in the village<sup>149</sup>. Caste cannot explain the activities of the Muslim peasants of Commilla who (in 1789) were said to be dictating the appointment of *Qazis* (religious leaders) in the village mosques and also looking after their maintenance<sup>150</sup>. Untouchability and landlessness are inadequate in explaining social stratification *even* among the Hindu peasants. Sanyal's study<sup>151</sup> of "lower" caste

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<sup>147</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1789, p.39; emphasis added.

<sup>148</sup> Ray and Ray, 1975: 84.

<sup>149</sup> Beveridge, 1876: 197.

<sup>150</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/14, 24 July 1789.

<sup>151</sup> H.Sanyal, 1981. Also O'Malley, 1911: 58, 60.

peasant groups like the *Sodgops* in Burdwan and *Kaivartas* of Midnapur indicates the manner in which these castes were stratified through a process of *internal differentiation* leading on the one hand to the formation of *Kaivarta* and *Sodgop zamindaris* in Midnapur and of poor peasants of the same caste on the other<sup>152</sup>.

Moreover, landlessness in absolute terms does not appear to have been a major agrarian problem in the eighteenth century. The picture of an uprooted peasantry roaming through the countryside in the wake of the famine of 1769-70 "in search of employment"<sup>153</sup> is largely overdrawn and certainly would not apply to eastern Bengal which did not suffer its ravages to the extent endured by the districts in western Bengal<sup>154</sup>. The major cleavage in rural society was not between the landowner and the landless (nor was it between the high-caste and the untouchable) but between the owners of adequate and inadequate land, or resources<sup>155</sup>. The distinction between adequate and inadequate was often rendered tenuous by the smallness of peasant holdings in *general* and the uncertainties created by periodic crises of subsistence.

Therefore the picture of the eighteenth century peasantry as one polarized between a "rich peasant class" and "untouchable landless groups" tends to provide a false image of rural stratification. Given the *general* smallness

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<sup>152</sup> See Lal Behari Day, *Bengal Peasant Life* (ed. M. Saha, Calcutta 1969) for a good account of intra-caste stratification among the *Sodgop* peasants in Burdwan in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>153</sup> Ray, 1979: 56; also Nagchaudhury-Zilly, 1982.

<sup>154</sup> See the descriptions of the famine in Select Committee Consultations, IOR P/A/10, from Richard Becher, Resident at the Darbar, 31 May 1770; also chapter 2 above. The famines and food shortages which struck the province after 1770 did not have demographic consequences as severe as that of the former year.

<sup>155</sup> For a similar point see Marshall, 1987: 7.



of peasant holdings, the virtual absence of absolute landlessness and a seemingly widespread shortage of resources we can perhaps only speak of two broad strata in the peasantry: the "poor" and the "middling"<sup>156</sup>. The "poor" were those peasants unable to reproduce themselves through household production because of insufficient land and/or other means of production. The "middling" peasants had lands which were considered adequate for their social and economic reproduction as well as for the generation of a small surplus which they presumably invested for some improvements in their lands or for the cultivation of better grade crops<sup>157</sup>, or both depending upon the nature of the current agricultural season. They may also have used their surpluses to give loans to their poorer counterparts in times of need<sup>158</sup>.

Yet our sources do give the impression that a "rich" peasant "class" did exist and that their activities were causing concern both to the local *zamindar* and to the state. John Shore described these peasants as those who

cultivate land, of which there is no account, and hold them in greater quantities than they engage for; ... they hold lands at reduced rates by collusion, obtain grant of land fit for immediate cultivation, on the reduced

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<sup>156</sup> I have extended the distinction between the poor and middle peasants as provided by Bernstein [1979: 431] in order to classify these peasants in eighteenth century Bengal.

<sup>157</sup> These were the peasants who could afford to cultivate crops like mulberry, hemp and tobacco along with high quality rice 'so that in case of failure of one, from casualties of weather, the whole together may yield a profit'[Correspondence & ca. Relative to the Cultivation of Hemp and Flax in Bengal from 1791 to 1799, IOR Home Misc. vol.375, from M. Atkinson to Peter Speke, 21 November 1792, p.318].

<sup>158</sup> Datta, 1986: 393.

terms of waste land; ... their power and influence over the inferior ryotts is great and extensive [and] if any attempt is made to check their abuses, they urge the ryots to complain and resist...<sup>159</sup> .

Henry Colebrooke describes three types of peasants in Bengal (i) those "applying the labour which they give to husbandry, solely to ground used on their account", (ii) those who were "monopolizing land to re-let it to the actual cultivator at an advanced rent, or for half the produce" and (iii) those who "call in the assistance of hired labour to assist their own"<sup>160</sup>.

These descriptions have influenced historians into reconstructing Bengal's peasant society as elaborately stratified into a "very powerful tenantry" and poor peasants. The former are also seen as a "village oligarchy" on grounds that they combined superior economic power with political clout. These formulations are questionable for a number of reasons. First, one has to consider the *geographical* location of this so-called "powerful tenantry". John Shore based his arguments on the situation prevailing in Dinajpur and Rajshahi in eastern Bengal and on Birbhum and Purnea in the west<sup>161</sup>. I have already drawn attention to the peculiarity of Dinajpur's rural society. The three remaining districts were those which had suffered extensive depopulation during the famine of 1769/70 and had subsequently become areas of unstable production<sup>162</sup>. The

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<sup>159</sup> *FR* 2, pp.56-57.

<sup>160</sup> *Remarks*, p.60.

<sup>161</sup> Incidentally even Henry Colebrooke's assessment was heavily influenced by the situation in Purnea having served there as the government's collector in the 1780s.

<sup>162</sup> By the mid-1770s Purnea was said to be an "impoverished country" with a "lowered value of lands and their produce". The corresponding decline of Rajshahi was  
(continued...)

famine took its greatest toll from the poor peasants and the artisans thereby reducing large tracts of cultivated land into wastes (*pateet*), a situation which seems to have persisted even when the worst had passed and other districts had managed to make post-famine recoveries<sup>163</sup>. Moreover the modes of reclamation were governed by a number of traditional customs which clearly favoured the customary rights of the established peasants even when they had been forced to desert. These facts leave nagging doubts about the validity of the argument of a large-scale takeover of land by the "superior ryotts" or by a "powerful tenantry".

Second, the reasons for characterizing these so-called "village oligarchs" as *peasants* are unclear. Reclaimers in Chittagong were quite often the *zamindari diwan* or *faujdar*<sup>164</sup>. From the point of view of the *zamindars* the problem does not appear to have been one of peasants colluding among themselves as much as it was the collaboration *between* the *zamindari* officials and the so-called "superior ryott". It is no accident that in almost all types of *zamindaris*, the universal complaint was the collusion of the *zamindari amil* with the "influential ryotts" in frauds pertaining to land or revenue. Such cases are numerous and need not be listed in all their details. There is however one complaint which is most representative of the entire *genre* of such complaints and therefore needs

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<sup>162</sup>(...continued)

"too evident a melancholy truth" [for Purnea BRC, IOR P/49/54, 18 July 1775, p.1232; for Rajshahi, *ibid*, P/49/52, 5 February 1775, pp.34-35]. For the economic decline of Birbhum [R.K.Gupta, 1977].

<sup>163</sup> According to the findings of the Amini Commission [1778] *pateet* lands constituted 35.95 percent of cultivable land in Birbhum and 25.98 percent in Purnea. These were the two districts with the biggest areas of cultivable wastes when compared with the rest of the province [for the figures of *pateet* lands in 1778, see Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 29086].

<sup>164</sup> Brit.Mus., Add.Ms.19286, f.19.

to be cited. This is the grievance expressed by the *zamindar* of Rajshahi (one of the largest and most famous of the eighteenth century *zamindaris*) to the Board of Revenue in May 1790 and needs to be quoted in full:

Many ryotts in this district, thro' collusion with the moffussul karmachari [official in the village] have caused a considerable part of their jummah [assessed] lands to be set down in the accounts as pulotoka or forsaken [lands] & fresh leases at the lowest rate of assessment have been granted for lands to their own dependents, which is fact to themselves. When they are called on for the payment of their original jummah, they produce these fictitious leases & thereby evade payment of a just demand.

The karmachari... in my zemmindarry have annually obtained considerable remissions from the fixed jummah of their lands [and] these lands [when] brought into cultivation yield a vast profit to them. Many persons holding leases of joat [cultivation] have possessed themselves of more lands than specified in their pottahs [leases]. Several Individuals of substance have by collusive means obtained remissions of revenue, *which the lower class of ryotts are obliged to make up for by contributions*. The consequence of which oppression is the desertion of numbers...<sup>165</sup>.

This indicates the anxiety of one of the most powerful of the eighteenth century *zamindars* and shows the overt influence of the *zamindari* officials in matters pertaining to the distribution of lands in the villages and the grant

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<sup>165</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/25, 28 May 1790; emphasis added.

of leases of cultivation (*pattas*) to *all* categories of peasants. I have classified these officials as non-peasants because there is no evidence to show that they *actually* tilled the land with their own, or with their families labour, and they largely belonged to the *non-agricultural* castes, like the *kayastha*<sup>166</sup>.

Positioned below the Brahmins in the caste hierarchy, these *kayasthas* corresponded more closely to (what Ray sees as) "a high-caste rural gentry" than with the agriculturists. The description provided by Colebrooke of the use of hired labour in agricultural production does not necessarily demonstrate the existence of a coterie of improving peasants "cultivating lands by using sharecroppers and agricultural labourers"<sup>167</sup>. As Colebrooke himself noticed, such practices were resorted to by those who "are restrained by [caste] prejudice from personal labour", these being the Brahmin<sup>168</sup> and presumably the *kayastha* castes. Nor does (what could only have been a very restricted) use of hired labour automatically indicate the

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<sup>166</sup> I have attempted to analyze the caste composition of the *zamindari karmachari* and *mal-i-zamins* in "Aspects of the Agrarian System of Bengal During the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century" [M.Phil.dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1980]. My evidence shows the overwhelming predominance of the *kayasthas* at all levels of the *zamindari* "bureaucracy". The important positions occupied by the *kayasthas* in *zamindari* administration was noticed by Ray [1979: 31 ff.] but the connection between their official position and their power was not established. These *kayasthas* were influential in Bihar for precisely the same reasons [Marshall, 1987: 37, 49, 173; Yang, 1989: 44-46]. They occupied similar positions practically all over North India and in many cases established their own equations of power in rural society at the expense of the *zamindar* and the revenue-farmer [Bayly, 1983: 166-67].

<sup>167</sup> Ray, 1979: 53.

<sup>168</sup> *Remarks*, p. 60.

"richness" of the employer<sup>169</sup>. These high-caste "gentry" would, for instance, include the indigent Brahmins of Rajshahi and Burdwan who had to eke out supplementary incomes by allowing the women in their households to spin cotton thread<sup>170</sup> in a society where spinning of thread and weaving of cloth were generally recognized to be the occupations of "the lower class of people..."<sup>171</sup>.

The participation of the indigent Brahmins in agricultural production, short of actually holding the plough, has been noted by Ray<sup>172</sup> but the case for the use of hired agricultural labour for production purposes has been largely overstated by her. The case of the *kayasthas* may perhaps have been different than that of the Brahmins. They had the necessary social and *political* authority by virtue of their place in the *zamindari* administration and it is likely that their lands were cultivated with a greater degree of economic efficiency, but there is practically no evidence to press this point further. On the contrary the data of the activities of these people suggest a minimal degree of *direct* participation in agricultural production. These were the *paid* employees of the *zamindars* who used their official positions to put pressures on the poorer peasantry in order to elicit bribes, and collaborated with those peasants with better resources by juggling their revenue accounts in order to acquire certain financial advantages. The link between the officials and

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<sup>169</sup> Even those peasants who had some surplus resources did not employ hired agricultural labour. For instance, cotton (a relatively capital intensive commodity) was grown by "ryots [who] employ no labour but manage the cultivation themselves" [BRP, IOR P/71/10, 15 June 1789].

<sup>170</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/17, 21 December 1789; also *ibid*, P/71/10, 15 June 1789.

<sup>171</sup> See for instance the proceedings in BRP, IOR P/71/10 and P/71/17 for descriptions of spinning and weaving as lower class occupations. Here the term "class" was used to point to the caste status of the artisans.

<sup>172</sup> Ray, 1979: 30.

the economy was located more in the realms of economic and political *corruption* than in the sphere of agricultural production.

The search of a "rich" peasant "class" in eighteenth century Bengal is therefore fraught with a number of difficulties:some empirical and some conceptual. The available evidence does not allow a division of peasant society into rich, middle, and poor-peasants. What we do get is a picture of a rural society where peasants were roughly divided into two strata:those who could reproduce their domestic economies and those who could not, and for the sake of analytical convenience I have divided them into "poor" and "middling" categories. "Rich" peasants, defined as the people with enough accumulated surpluses to invest in production "through the purchase of superior means of production and/or labour power"and who could "initiate and maintain a cycle of *extended reproduction*"<sup>173</sup> were largely absent in society.

The "richness" of a peasant could perhaps be explained if one is able to show that they cultivated "cash" crops (like mulberry or cotton) almost exclusively on their own, and that the surplus which accrued was accumulated independently by them and subsequently used for expanded reproduction. But this was not so. The cultivation of mulberry trees (and the production of silk), closely associated with the economic interests of the state, was financed by the East India Company. Cotton was grown in small quantities in tiny plots of land *subsidiary* to the cultivation of rice and other food-crops and the difference between the "rich" peasant and the "poor" in terms of the portion of an individual's land each could devote to its cultivation was minimal: "the richer class of ryotts may possess a begah [0.3 acre] each of cotton & the poorer sort from 8 to 10 cuttahs [0.16 to 0.20 acres], the *produce of which is generally converted to family consumption*" states

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<sup>173</sup> Bernstein, 1979: 431.

a report on the state of cotton cultivation of western Bengal in 1789 <sup>174</sup>. Sugarcane and tobacco were seldom grown by peasants with their own resources. They were (as I will discuss in chapters 5 and 6) cultivated by a wide variety of advances taken by the cultivator from the merchant. This is not to suggest a general scarcity of resources or a shortage of accumulated surplus in the hands of the rural rich; but these were *not* the "rich" peasants. One has to look to the *non-peasant* strata (the *zamindar* and the *byapari*) to understand the dynamics of social differentiation in rural Bengal. The role of the *zamindars* was discussed in chapter 3. The interaction between the merchants and agricultural production will be discussed in chapter 6. Obviously, to comprehend the social relations in production, it is necessary to analyze the material milieu in which agricultural production was organized and undertaken.

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<sup>174</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/10, 15 June 1789; emphasis added.



## Chapter 5

### **Peasant Production: Agriculture and the State of the Agrarian Economy**

Agricultural production in the late eighteenth century was much more than the use of land and labour to produce a variety of crops. It was the central point of the agrarian economy around which various other social relations were articulated. Thus the state of the entire agrarian economy, defined as the intermeshing of natural factors, social relations and institutional networks in the countryside, was determined by the fluctuations in the domain of agricultural production and peasant enterprise. The primacy of agriculture in the economy was all the more vital because even non-agricultural, or artisanal, production was largely a part of agriculture as the artisans, in most cases, were primarily peasants (i.e. they cultivated land by the use of their own or their domestic labour) who entered non-agricultural production as an extension of their main enterprise as cultivators. Salt was manufactured by the "tillers of the land" who used the slack agricultural season to eke out supplementary incomes by working in the salt-pans (*khalaries*)<sup>1</sup>, while the weavers had the "double resource of tilling the lands"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See, BRC, IOR P/49/52, 29 May 1775; and *ibid.*, P/50/3, 12 August 1777; *Ibid.*, P/51/45, 5 August 1789 for statements regarding the combination of agriculture and artisanal production in the salt sector.

<sup>2</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol.8, 5 December 1771.

The salient features of agricultural production and the agrarian economy in the late eighteenth century

At first glance, the agrarian economy of Bengal in the late eighteenth century seems to have operated under an apparent paradox. On the one hand there was, as almost all contemporary observers and officials remarked, the remarkable natural fertility of the soil. For Warren Hastings, the wealth of Bengal was due to the soil's "fertility and the number and industry of its inhabitants"<sup>3</sup>. James Rennell saw the province as possessing some "of the most fertile lands in the Universe"<sup>4</sup>. William Tennant observed, in 1797, that Bengal had "an excellent soil and climate, and possessed of almost every variety of cultivated grains, and competent number of hands to raise them..."<sup>5</sup>. One of the most revealing descriptions of such intrinsic fertility of land comes from the district of 24-Parganas in 1762. Here "the fertility and goodness of the soil is proved by its producing everything, almost spontaneously. Here:

You have the Cocoanut, Date, Palmeira, Serepul, Tamarind, Plantain and several other trees not known to me. We passed through fields of Mustard, Melons, Gram, Flax, Pease, Cotton & ca. and yet the Inhabitants are far from being either industrious or skilful. *They scarcely scratch the Superfices of the Earth to make it yield* this increase in many things; and in others they sow without any previous preparation at all... The country every where abounds

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<sup>3</sup> "State of Bengal in 1784", in Forrest (ed.), 1910: 21.

<sup>4</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 765, 6 April 1772, p. 241.

<sup>5</sup> *Indian Recreations*, vol. 2, p. 8.

with cattle<sup>6</sup>.

In Chittagong:

Ploughing is indeed by no means intended to turn the Ground. It merely scratches the Surface, divides the Sward; and gives access to the teeth of the Harrow, or rather the Bullock rake to lay hold of the weeds<sup>7</sup>.

On the other hand the producers actually worked under the most resource constrained circumstances. It was generally recognized that almost without exception these poor peasants were unable *even to commence* agricultural operations without outside financial aid<sup>8</sup>. "The lower Ruatts [*raiyats*] live from hand to mouth and without *tacavi* or advances cannot afford to cultivate a piece of ground"<sup>9</sup>. "The want of capital employed in agriculture and manufactures, cripples every enterprise" was how Reverend William Tennant described the state of production in the province<sup>10</sup>. James Rennell believed that "the labourers suffer[ed] such great oppressions" that they were rendered unable to work their lands to full capacity<sup>11</sup>. Later estimates made by Buchanan-Hamilton in the districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur (*circa* 1807) reveals that nearly 52

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<sup>6</sup> Hugh Cameron to Council, IOR Home Misc., vol. 47, 5 September 1762, pp. 43-44; emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> F. Buchanan, "An Account of a Journey Through the Provinces of Chittagong and Tipperah, 1798", Brit. Mus., Add. Ms., 19286, f. 2.

<sup>8</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol. 5, 23 May 1771; BRC, IOR P/51/19, 21 March 1788; Ibid, P/51/21, 14 June 1788; also Datta, 1986: 393.

<sup>9</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1789.

<sup>10</sup> *Indian Recreations*, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 765, p. 241.

percent of the agricultural population in Rangpur<sup>12</sup> and 77 percent in Dinajpur<sup>13</sup> were sharecroppers, agricultural labourers or "needy farmers".

With regard to its organization, Bengal's agriculture was overwhelmingly undertaken on small peasant farms operated by individual peasant families with the use of domestic labour. It was therefore a classic example of petty production: household centred and labour intensive, as well as perennially constrained by the lack of resources. The other major aspect of Bengal's agricultural production was the apparent predominance of the so-called "subsistence" sector, rice and paddy, in overall production. The so-called "cash crop" sector was subsidiary to this major productive enterprise. The data pertaining to patterns of cultivation will be discussed shortly.

The combination of small peasant-holdings and the predominance of the primary staples in agricultural production may perhaps give the impression of a natural economy producing only use-values meant for immediate consumption. Such an impression would be misleading as there were other factors of decisive influence in the economy. These were (a) a rising demand for food in the province and the creation of a regionally integrated grain market and (b) the apparently persistent incursions of famines and severe crop failures<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, as Francesca Bray points out, the predominance of grain production in small-peasant holdings has historically been the major form in which agricultural production has been organized in wet-rice growing societies, which have not prevented such societies from undergoing significant degrees of commercialization<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Buchanan, "Statistical Tables of Ronggoppur", IOL, Ms.Eur.G.11, Table 30.

<sup>13</sup> M.Martin, 1976, vol.3: 906.

<sup>14</sup> Discussed in chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>15</sup> Francesca Bray, 1983: 3-34.

The discussion in chapter 3 has shown that positioned above these producers were a whole range of landed-proprietors who combined various administrative functions with active roles in the maintenance and furtherance of agricultural production. They, especially the *zamindars*, personally held fairly large tracts of land (variously called *khamar*, *nij-jote* or *nij-talluqa*) which were cultivated by sharecroppers on an extensive scale, and the produce from such lands was sold in the markets often established by the landed proprietors themselves. The other social strata who had a keen interest in production and who played an active part in its processes were the grain-merchants (*byaparis*). They did not participate in production directly, but provided a variety of consumption and production loans to the peasants; and the records suggest that most cultivators depended heavily on such loans. The nature of mercantile penetration in agricultural production will be discussed at length in chapter 6.

Thus we tend to get a picture of an agrarian society in which severe shortage of resources were faced by most of the producers but these were concentrated in a few hands who were also willing to part with such resources to the needy, albeit at a heavy price. A rising demand for food and the existence of an integrated market influenced the decision of these largely non-peasant strata to invest in agricultural production, but the scarcity of resources in the hands of the small peasants and the economic vulnerability created by famines were instrumental in shaping the social relations in production, particularly those of domination and subordination; they were also significant in determining the state of the agrarian economy.

Agricultural production: cultivation, land use and output

Agricultural production-- the utilization of land to procure various crops-- was organized around three harvest seasons: *aman* (winter), *aus* (spring) and *boro* (summer). Of the three, *aman* and *aus* were considered the most important, both in terms of output and their share in the payment of revenue (chapter 1, figure 10) since all the major cash crops were grown in these two seasons. The winter rice was commercially the most valuable as it was grown principally for sale.

The evidence available (table 5.2, p. 261) certainly suggests that the grand purpose of agricultural production was the cultivation of paddy (*dhan*) for rice. For Tennant:

The culture of almost every plant, and particularly of the *gramina*, in proportion as it has long been diffused, induces numerous varieties. The several seasons of cultivation, added to the influence of soil and climate, have multiplied the different species of rice, into endless variety. From the awned and unawned, from that growing on the mountains to that produced in humid situations, there are various diversities adapted to every circumstance of soil, climate and season...<sup>16</sup>

Land-use for the cultivation of rice was a complex process. The first priority was obviously access to water, and here the central concern was to grow the maximum permissible on lands within the range of the seasonal overflow of the various rivers and streams. "The annual inundation, to which the soil is principally indebted for its fertility, regulates the sites of cultivation, and in some measure the time of sowing and reaping" was how Taylor described the principal considerations behind the

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<sup>16</sup> *Indian Recreations*, 2, p. 9; emphasis original.

cultivation of rice in Dhaka<sup>17</sup>. In Midnapur, rice was grown on *jala* (low-lying) lands for reasons of their close access to water: the *jala* was further sub-divided into eight different types depending on each one's elevation, and different types of rice were grown on each<sup>18</sup>. Kyd's survey of cultivation on the western banks of the Hughli river shows that the broadcast summer rice was sown on the lands of the lowest elevation (called *dowrah*), while the transplanted winter rice was planted on lands called *caddurie* which were "a little elevated, not more than five or six inches, above the common level of the [*dowrah*]"<sup>19</sup>.

Under normal circumstances, the entire agricultural output, as well as the payment of revenue *kists* [installments], was concentrated in the nine months between *Baisakh* (April-May) and *Pous* (December-January), "no crops of any consequence are cut after the month of Poose [*Pous*], and the intervening months of Maug, Phagun and Choite [January-April] are taken up in cultivating those lands from which the resources of the ensuing year are derived"<sup>20</sup>. The preparation of land for rice was as follows:

<i>Pous</i> to <i>Phalgun</i>	(January to March)	for <i>aman</i> rice
<i>Pous</i> and <i>Magh</i>	(December to February)	for <i>aus</i> rice
<i>Pous</i>	(December-January)	for <i>boro</i> rice

The number of times the land had to be ploughed obviously depended on topography. In the western parts of Dhaka, where the soil "consisted of red Kunkur [gravel] and of different strata of clay", the *aman* rice land required

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<sup>17</sup> Taylor, 1840: 124.

<sup>18</sup> See BRC, IOR P/51/15, 28 January 1787 for details.

<sup>19</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, ff. 30-31.

<sup>20</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/14, 7 September 1789.

to be ploughed sixteen times<sup>21</sup>, whereas the soil on the western banks of the Hughli was rendered fit for this harvest by ploughing it twice<sup>22</sup>. In the 24-Parganas, the rice land was prepared by barely "scratching the superficies of the earth"<sup>23</sup>. The *boro* harvest did not require the land to be ploughed more than once. In eastern Bengal it was grown "on churs, or low marshy ground after the waters have subsided, consequently it [was] not sown till late in the season"<sup>24</sup>. In western Bengal, *boro* rice land was "the lowest admitting of cultivation", which:

Require no manure, produces a constant succession of rice *ad infinitum*, without any discernible decrease of vegetative power, requiring only [to be] annually sown with successive varieties of grain<sup>25</sup>.

In the largely flat alluvial plains of southern and south-eastern Bengal, the same land was used to procure multiple crops of rice in succession. Thus in Midnapur, *jala* land of the "1<sup>st</sup>" kind... produces two crops of rice at the same time, the first called ause... and the other aumeen"<sup>26</sup>. In eastern Bengal:

The aumun crop being cut in Aughun [November-December], the Reapers scatter Khassarie [vetch] amongst the stubble, while the soil is yet moist and soft from the inundation, which springs up without any trouble, and is gathered in Phagun [February-March].

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor, 1840: 3, 125.

<sup>22</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, f. 32.

<sup>23</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 47, p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/38, 4 February 1788.

<sup>25</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, f. 30; emphasis original.

<sup>26</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/15, 28 January 1787.



The stubble and stalk of the khassarie are then set on fire and the ashes ploughed in with the soil. The boro dhan [paddy] mixed with aumun is then sown; this [boro] being of very quick growth is ripe in Jeyte or Assar [May to July]; it is then cut and the aumun which is of slower growth rises with the water [i.e. the seasonal inundation] and is cut in Aughun [November-December]<sup>27</sup>.

Naturally, the cultivation of rice was labour intensive, though in the small peasant-holdings the entire exercise was perhaps undertaken by using the labour available in individual households. Apart from ploughing, labour was required most in "1<sup>st</sup> for clearing the grounds from roots of grass, 2<sup>nd</sup> for weeding and 3<sup>rd</sup> for reaping"<sup>28</sup>. Transplanted winter rice entailed the further task of preparing the nursery for rearing the seedlings, which were then re-planted in the main field once they had attained a height of about 18 inches<sup>29</sup>. The costs of cultivating a *bigha* of land with rice of this kind was 3.875 rupees during Kyd's survey of the western Banks of the Hughli in 1791<sup>30</sup>; in Commilla (eastern Bengal) the comparative costs were 2.30 rupees in 1789<sup>31</sup>. The seed yield ratio appears to have ranged from 1:24 in parts of western Bengal<sup>32</sup> to 1:20 in Dhaka<sup>33</sup>. Data available from *parganas* in Commilla,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., P/51/40, 15 July 1789.

<sup>28</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1789; also Colebrooke, *Remarks*, pp. 61-63.

<sup>29</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, f. 32.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1789.

<sup>32</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, f. 31.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, 1840: 125. The provincial average according to Colebrooke was 1:15 circa 1794 [*Remarks*, p. 63].

Rangpur, Midnapur and Burdwan show the following output of the *aman* harvest per *bigha*:<sup>34</sup>

<i>parganas</i> in	Average produce (maunds)
Commilla	8
Rangpur	10.72
Midnapur	10.5
Burdwan	10.71

Various leguminous plants were grown in close association with rice, often on the same land. As discussed earlier, the rotation of *khassari* on rice lands, and then using the stubble to fertilize the land for the next rice harvest seems to have been well developed in eastern Bengal. While vetches would grow in flooded soil, other lentils, especially those called *kalai*, *moog* and *mussoor*, "much eaten by the natives, and particularly when split, is called dall" required just the right amount of moisture for "if sown on [land] too wet, [lentils] will not vegetate, if on too dry, will never thrive, nor make any adequate return for labour"<sup>35</sup>. Therefore lentils and vetches depended on proper timing, and this is why *kalai* in western Bengal was planted on the rice ground "in the intervals unoccupied by the tufts of rice... in the intermediate month of Caitic [October-November] on the taking off of the rains, before cutting down the 2<sup>nd</sup> crop [*aman*] of rice, [the land now] being no longer overflowed but drenched in moisture"; once harvested in *Phalgun* [February-March], "the ground is then prepared three or four times in readiness for the Baisak

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<sup>34</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1789; Ibid., P/52/42, 9 March 1792; ibid., P/52/50, 19 October 1790, and BRP, IOR P/71/22, 20 March 1790.

<sup>35</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/22, 23 July 1788.

[aus] sowing of the ensuing season"<sup>36</sup>. In Midnapur, *kalai* was considered valuable enough to share the land alternately with sugar cane; it was grown on *cola* (elevated) land of the "4<sup>th</sup> kind [which] yields Ook, sugar-cane, one year and Kalai the next"<sup>37</sup>. In eastern Bengal, jute (*paat*) lands, after the harvest, were made "ready to receive... pease and pulses of various descriptions [whose] harvest is reaped a short time before it is expedient to recommence the culture of the [jute], and the land bears a succession of [such] crops for many years"<sup>38</sup>.

The output of these leguminous plants from different districts is not known, but the evidence from Commilla and Rangpur indicates that the produce from one *bigha* of land, at least in east Bengal, was as follows:

Commilla:<sup>39</sup>

Gram	5 maunds
Peas	7 "
Lentil, <i>moog</i>	2 "

Rangpur:<sup>40</sup>

<i>Kalai</i>	1.98 maunds
Gram	1.5 "
<i>Mussoor</i>	1.98 "

Western Bengal:<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 95, f. 32.

<sup>37</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/15, 28 January 1787.

<sup>38</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 375, p. 318.

<sup>39</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1787.

<sup>40</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/22, 20 March 1790.

<sup>41</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, f. 35.

**MUSSOOR 2 maunds**

It is necessary to bear in mind that these lentils and vetches had an important position in the provincial demand for food, as they were crucial ingredients in the daily diet of the people. Thus this crop was essentially designed for sale, and a substantial part of the intra-regional trade in food products, particularly from western in to eastern Bengal, was in split pulses or *dal*<sup>42</sup>.

Tennant considered the "universal use and vast consumption of vegetable oils" in Bengal as "prejudicial to agriculture" because "much land and a great proportion of the cultivated land" was used by such cultivation, which Tennant thought "trench deeply upon the productive ground for human sustenance"<sup>43</sup>. Obviously his reservations were not well founded for, as Figure 16 (p. 258) shows, oil seeds constituted a mere 3.5 per cent of the gross agricultural output *circa* 1794. Nevertheless, its cultivation was important for local production and trade. In Jessore, for instance, *til* (sesame) was considered a crop of the "first class" which bore "a proportion of four annas [i.e. 25 per cent] to the jumma"<sup>44</sup>. Among the main oil producing plants were those of sesame, mustard [*sarson*] and *teesy* [linseed]<sup>45</sup>; some oil was also extracted from poppy seeds: in Rangpur, "the poppy seed is used solely for making oil [and] the Ryotts sell the poppy seed to the Pikars [traders' middlemen] and Oilmen in the Mofussil"<sup>46</sup>.

Among the vegetable oil plants most coveted for its culinary and commercial importance was mustard. In the flat

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<sup>42</sup> Taylor, 1840: 129.

<sup>43</sup> *Indian Recreations*, 2, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/22, 23 July 1788.

<sup>45</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/40, 3 April 1788.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, P/72/15, 19 April 1793.

alluvial plains of Gangetic west Bengal, mustard was often sown on the banks of the river after the monsoonal overflow of its water had subsided. Here the chief resource was the sediments deposited by the seasonal inundation which Tennant considered "the richest of all soils". The mustard seed was sown broadcast "and gently covered with a harrow, or by scratching the mould with a branch of a tree", after which "the crop makes its appearance seemingly in great abundance, and one of the most beautiful to the eye which the country affords"<sup>47</sup>. In his survey of the western banks of the Hughli, Robert Kyd noticed that both mustard and sesame were grown on a category of land called "dangeah", this being the most elevated land where production was principally dependent on "artificial labour", manuring and water-retention "by means of artificial ledges of about 8 or 10 inches high"; the "dangeah" was primarily meant for the cultivation of sugar cane, but it simultaneously yielded two crops of "sersong and teel", i.e., mustard and sesame<sup>48</sup>. In general, the mustard plant was sown on relatively higher ground in order to prevent an excessive penetration of water in the month of *Kartik* (October-November) and reaped in *Magh* or *Phagun* (January to March)<sup>49</sup>.

*Teesy* was grown on rice lands, preferably upon those which "have lain fallow for 3 or 4 years". The ground was ploughed three times and the seed sown in *Agrahan* [November-December]. The crop was harvested "four months after the seed is sown or about the month of *Faugun* and *Choite* [February-April]... & oxen employed to tread the seed from which the oil is extracted"; "the treading of oxen [also] destroys the plants and bark adhering to them

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<sup>47</sup> *Indian Recreations*, 2, pp.136-37. Tennant's description of the mustard plant was from Chandernagar in 1797.

<sup>48</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, ff. 33-35.

<sup>49</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/15, 28 January 1787.

[the seeds]"<sup>50</sup>. The output of these various oilseeds per *bigha* in different areas was as follows<sup>51</sup>:

District	Oilseed	Output per <i>bigha</i> in maunds
Sylhet	<i>Teesy</i>	4
Commilla	<i>Til</i>	2
"	Mustard	3
Rangpur	Mustard	1.9
Muhammadshahi	Mustard	1.5
Hughli	Mustard	3
"	<i>Til</i>	1.27

There was a general consensus among contemporaries that the cultivation of sugar cane and the manufacture of refined sugar had declined substantially during the course of the late eighteenth century. "Formerly sugar was one of the staple articles of Bengal", but by 1776 "the sugar trade of Bengal [had] in fact [become] annihilated" because of "the increase in the price of raw material & of labour"<sup>52</sup>; but by the time of the Permanent Settlement the exports of sugar from Bengal had once again become "considerable" in relation to those from rice and other food grains<sup>53</sup>. What these descriptions indicate is perhaps a relative decline in the *export* of sugar from Bengal which should not be taken to imply a reduction in the importance of sugar cane as a valuable cash-crop or a comparable

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<sup>50</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 375, pp. 305-7.

<sup>51</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1789; BRP, IOR P/71/22, 20 March 1790 and 22 March 1790; Ior Home Misc., vol. 375, p. 305; IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, f. 35.

<sup>52</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/62, 5 June 1776. Also see James Prinsep, *Bengal Sugar*, London, 1794 [IOL Tracts, vol. 436 a].

<sup>53</sup> Minute of the Board of Trade, 23 October 1793, IOR, Home Misc., vol. 375, p. 41.

reduction in the importance of sugar in *domestic* consumption or internal trade. Peasants in Chittagong cultivated "a good deal of Sugar Cane about [their] houses", and during his journey through this district, Buchanan "heard the creaking of mills employed in expressing the juice"<sup>54</sup>. As will be discussed subsequently, the cultivation of sugar cane was based on investments made by the local merchants who, in turn, directed the produce, especially of refined sugar, to feed the large and intermediate towns<sup>55</sup>. The history of sugar in our period offers a good example of the *re-direction* of agricultural commodities from export to internal consumption under the influence of a rising demand for food in the province, whose main features have been discussed in chapter 1.

By nature the cultivation of sugar cane was an expensive business, and the shortage of resources in among the majority of peasants meant that the land actually under its cultivation at any point in time, or in any particular district, was bound to be relatively small. This can be seen from the district-wise output of sugar in table 5.

Table 5

Estimates of land under sugarcane in some districts in the 1790s

District	Sugar cane land (in <i>bighas</i> )
Burdwan	25,000
Birbhum	14,663
Purnea	26,500

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<sup>54</sup> Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 19286, f.8.

<sup>55</sup> See BRP, IOR P/72/10, 26 December 1792 for such merchants in Birbhum; also see IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 4, ff. 70-71 for merchants in Rangpur.

24-Parganas	765.40
Jessore	760.80
Dinajpur	13,959.50
Dhaka	10,000

Source: BRP, IOR P/72/8, 29 October 1792; *ibid.*, P/72/10, 26 December 1792.

Nevertheless this was a valuable crop, and great care was taken to ensure its success wherever it was sown. In Birbhum, "lands appropriated to the cultivation of sugarcane [were] of various qualities distinguished in to first, second and third agreeable to the quantity & quality they produce[d]"<sup>56</sup>. The cane was universally planted in high (*colla*) of the best kind in *Baisakh* [April-May] and cut over the months of *Magh* [January-February] and *Phalgun* [February-March]<sup>57</sup>. The sugar cane ground:

Being previously manured with rich soil taken from low bottoms at the rate of one basket load p[er] square fathom, mixed with the expressed old seed of Sersong [mustard]... in the proportion of two and a half maunds per biggah and trenched one span deep forming ridges one and a half cubits [30 inches] broad; the sugarcane is planted in Bysaac [*Baisakh*] by slips taken from the preceding years stock in two lines or rows on each ridge at the distance of one cubit. One biggah contains 6500 slips...<sup>58</sup>.

In Chittagong:

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<sup>56</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/10, 26 December 1792.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, P/70/40, appendix to proceedings of April 1788; BRC, IOR P/51/15, 28 January 1787.

<sup>58</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, ff. 33-34.



The leaves of the preceding crop... are burned, and the ashes with cowdung serve for manure. The field is then well laboured, and levelled, and afterwards divided into beds, 20 feet long and 2 broad. These beds are separated by ridges, about half a foot high, and as much broad, which serve to confine the water bestowed on the young plants. In these beds, the joints of the sugarcane are placed obliquely with one end projecting about three inches above the surface. The joints are placed in the bed sometime in one Row, sometime in two, and one distant from another about one foot. The joints are carefully watered, till they push out young shoots. The earth is then gathered up about them in ridges and this operation serves for weeding<sup>59</sup>

Sugarcane also required extensive manuring in three stages. The first manuring was done while ploughing with "a compost made of soil or mud taken from the bottom of tanks, rotten vegetables and cows dung"; the second stage was when "oil cake broken to dust" was mixed in the soil "when the plants are put in the ground"; and finally "when they [the cane] attain a height of one cubit [the cultivators] strew the ground over with the dust of oil cake in the proportion of 2 maunds per Begah"<sup>60</sup>. Sugar cane also involved a fairly high intensive use of labour in its production. In east Bengal, the number of labourers needed were<sup>61</sup>:

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<sup>59</sup> Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 19286, f.13.

<sup>60</sup> "Substance of a Conversation with Godadur Mundel, of the Village of Deca, in the Purgunnah of Renalty, and Province of Burdwan, distance 24 Coss (50 Miles) from Calcutta", in Prinsep, *Bengal Sugar*, p.77-78; also Buchanan, "Ronggoppur" [IOL, Ms.Eur.D.75, vol.2, book 4, f.82] for the use of oil cake for manure in lands producing sugar, tobacco and betel-leaf.

<sup>61</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1789.

Ploughing	4 labourers for a month
Enclosing the beds	2 labourers for a month
Planting	4 labourers for a month
Making beds and rows	2 labourers per month
Cutting and pressing the juice	10 labourers for 8 days
Boiling the juice	3 labourers for 8 days

The amount of labour-time socially necessary for cultivating 5 *bighas* in the "environs of Calcutta" was estimated (in 1792) in the following fashion<sup>62</sup>:

Ploughing	5 ploughs for 10 days
Original nurseries for the cane	45 days
Transplanting shoots to main nursery	20 "
Watering the nursery beds	10 "
Transplanting shoots in the main field	50 "
Watering shoots in the fields	40 "
Clearing roots and trenching between rows	50 "
Stripping dead leaves from plants and weeding	60 "
Binding the cane together	100 "
Cutting the cane	240 "
Total necessary labour time	615 "

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<sup>62</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/8, 29 October 1792.

The costs involved in an operation of this magnitude were certainly beyond the capacity of ordinary cultivators. For instance, the district of Purnea, where there was apparently no "deficiency of land fit for the cultivation of sugar cane", very little of the cultivated land was actually utilized for its production because:

The produce is so small in proportion to the first expense added to that of cultivation, that the cultivator is not reimbursed in the first year & does not gain his profit until the end of the second year. The Ryots therefore prefer the cultivation of articles which yield an early profit<sup>63</sup>.

Additionally sugar cane sapped the vitality of the soil in three years, after which it needed to be kept fallow for more than four years "before it recovers its vegetative powers"<sup>64</sup>. Peasants tried to replenish the soil by planting legumes (*kalai* and *mussoor*) in the intervening spaces between the cane-stems<sup>65</sup>, but it was still an expensive proposition both in terms of labour and capital costs. Thus in Mymensing, "the ground prepared for planting the [sugar] cane must be raised and manured at a great expence, and the labour of cultivating it is not compensated in the same proportion with the cultivation of other productions better suited to the species of Land it occupies"<sup>66</sup>.

The connection between scarce resources and choice of crops by the peasants will be discussed below, but it was precisely this constraint which allowed the sugar-merchant to become instrumental in maintaining and furthering its

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<sup>63</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/8, 29 October 1792.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., P/72/10, 26 December 1792.

<sup>65</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/15, 28 January 1787; also Buchanan, "Ronggoppur", IOL, Ms. Eur. D.75, f.46.

<sup>66</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/10, 26 November 1792.

cultivation. Advance contracts taken by the cultivators from the merchants for the cultivation of sugar cane were widely prevalent in west Bengal; it was certainly the major form of cultivation in Birbhum<sup>67</sup>. Prinsep's testimony regarding the cultivation of cane and sugar (in 1793) shows that the main financial source for the peasant cultivating sugar cane was the "mahagen", who levied an interest of "one anna monthly for every rupees advanced, which is equal to 75 per cent.per annum, and never less than 6 pice" or 37.5 per cent<sup>68</sup>.

The available evidence for the output of sugar cane from a *bigha* of land, and the amount of refined sugar (*cheeni*) or molasses (*gur*) which could be procured from a maund of sugar cane juice is outlined in table 5.1.

Table 5.1

Output of sugar cane, sugar and molasses (maunds)

Region	Output of cane (per <i>bigha</i> )	Sugar	molasses
Hughli	8	0.37	0.62
Burdwan	15 to 18	0.25	-
Dinajpur	14	0.25	0.62
Purnea	10.2 to 13	0.01	0.15
Commilla	12	-	0.33
Jessore	11.5	-	-
Birbhum	18.2	0.13	0.56

Source: IOL, Ms. Eur. F.95, f.34; BRP, IOR P/72/10; Prinsep, *Bengal Sugar*, op.cit., p.26.

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<sup>67</sup> BRP, P/72/10, 26 December 1792.

<sup>68</sup> *Bengal Sugar*, op.cit., p.54-55.

Though the cultivation of betel-leaf (*paan*) did not find adequate emphasis in Colebrooke's *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal*, it was nevertheless an important item of agricultural production. As discussed earlier (chapter 1) local merchants had established near-monopolies in the internal trade in betel-leaf during the *Nizamat* and this seems to have continued in our period too<sup>69</sup>. The chief reasons behind these localized monopolies were (a) that trade in betel-leaf was extremely profitable despite the perishable nature of this commodity, (b) there was an extensive and growing demand for this leaf: as Buchanan noted, its internal demand for consumption was "enormous"<sup>70</sup> and (c) the cultivation of betel-leaf was expensive and peasants were extensively funded by betel-merchants who made "advances to the Ryots many months before they [the leaves] were fit for reaping"<sup>71</sup>. Thus betel-leaf production provides another good example of the inter-relationship between peasant enterprise and commercialization of agricultural production in the late eighteenth century.

The leaf grown entirely for commercial purposes was reared in specially constructed gardens called *vorof*, and these were completely distinct, and required a different kind of cultivation, than the leaves which most villagers grew in their own kitchen-gardens. The latter was called *gachhoya paan* (literally touching the tree) because they were grown as creepers planted to the roots of trees. The betel-vine was then naturally allowed to climb along the trunk in order to produce an inferior quality leaf for domestic consumption, and none of it was sold<sup>72</sup>. In

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<sup>69</sup> For instance the sole trader in betel-leaf for the whole of Dhaka city in 1789 was Ganesh Das Tiwari [BRC, IOR P/51/50, 24 October 1789].

<sup>70</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 4, f. 48.

<sup>71</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/17, 17 March 1788.

<sup>72</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. G. 75, vol. 2, book 4, f. 51.

contrast were the leaves grown in special sites whose entire output was designed for sale. The vine-slips were planted in *Kartik* [October-November] but there were no specific reaping seasons as these vines, once matured, would bear leaves for 9 to 10 years in west Bengal<sup>73</sup> and up to 6 or 7 years in the east<sup>74</sup>, and the leaves were "taken away from time to time as they ripen"<sup>75</sup>. The betel-vine:

The leaf of which forms part of the composition of the article of luxury among the natives... is raised on artificial eminences from 3 to 5 feet above the common level under a kind of shed composed of the stems of the *Dooncha* [?], the roof and walls loosely compacted so as to be pervious to the air and rain, and to afford a cover only against the violence of the solar rays<sup>76</sup>.

Buchanan gives the following description of betel-leaf cultivation in Chittagong:

The betel leaf is a very delicate plant, and requires vast attention in the cultivation. The ground on which it is raised must be high. After it has been well wrought, and cleared of weed, in order to completely carry off the water it is, by narrow trenches, divided into beds two cubits wide. Upon these the earth from the trenches is thrown, and in the middle of each row a Row of betel slips is planted, at a distance of two spans. Sticks about 8 feet long are then stuck up in the form of the St. Andrew's Cross, in order to support the plant which is a creeper. Other sticks are laid, horizontally

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<sup>73</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/15, 28 January 1787.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., P/51/40, 15 July 1789.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> IOL, MS. Eur. F. 95, f. 42.

over the crosses, and on them is spread straw or grass to keep off the Sun... The wind must also be excluded from this delicate vegetable by covering the sides of the Garden with palm leaves or straw<sup>77</sup>

To construct such gardens, the earth had first to be dug to the depth of 10 inches, then filled with soft mud mixed with a manure of mustard oil-cakes which remained after the oil had been extracted. The entire garden had to be enclosed by a bamboo wall and the roof was made of bamboos mixed with mud and straw. The outer wall was tied with rattan canes. The vines were planted in straight beds and rows, manured with the same mixture of mud and oil-cakes and then constantly watered and weeded and watched for worms. The vine-stems were never allowed to rise to the roof-level. The stem was constantly shortened, not by cutting from the top but by holding the stalk from near the root, drawing it out and then making a fold in the stalk which was covered with mud and manure. This process was repeated each time the stalk grew beyond the maximum permissible height<sup>78</sup>.

Such activities were undoubtedly both labour and capital intensive. In west Bengal the average cost of planting a *bigha* with *paan* was estimated at 30 rupees in 1791<sup>79</sup>, but in the east it was higher: in Commilla the costs were 81.94 rupees a *bigha* in 1789<sup>80</sup>, while in Dinajpur they were 168 rupees *circa* 1807<sup>81</sup>. Returns also differed between the west and the east: in Hughli a *bigha* of betel-leaf would give a return of 475 rupees a year, in Commilla the return

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<sup>77</sup> Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 19286, f.22.

<sup>78</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1789.

<sup>79</sup> IOL, MS.Eur.F.95, f.42.

<sup>80</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1789.

<sup>81</sup> Martin, 1976, vol.3: 864-65.

was 200 rupees<sup>82</sup>.

According to Colebrooke, "tobacco [is] a very profitable culture [and] it is eagerly pursued" in Bengal<sup>83</sup>. We have some evidence regarding the estimated produce of this crop from different districts<sup>84</sup>.

District	Output in maunds
Purnea	50,000
Nadia	38,000
24-Parganas	4,000
Midnapur and Jalasor	3,237
Bishnupur	1,500
Jessore	5,000
Muhamadshahi	2,400
Sarfarpur	1,825
Rangpur	3,00,000

These figures show that the cultivation of tobacco was unevenly disseminated in the province. While Rangpur produced the largest quantities of tobacco, its neighbouring district of Dinajpur produced practically none, its land being considered "not favourable for the culture of it"<sup>85</sup>. Nevertheless tobacco was one of the principal items of non-food consumption and its internal demand was substantial: in most districts the local leaf was "not equal to the consumption". There was apparently a fairly well-marked social difference in the use of tobacco: the "lower class of natives" stuck to the local, and often

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<sup>82</sup> Compare, IOL, MS.Eur.F.95, f.42 and BRC, IOR P/51.40, 15 July 1789.

<sup>83</sup> *Remarks*, p.76.

<sup>84</sup> IOR, BRP P/72/10, 15 June 1789.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 May 1789.



insipid, product, while the "more opulent natives" tended to consume finer quality tobaccos regularly imported from Chunar, Patna and Rajmahal<sup>86</sup>.

"The culture of tobacco is laborious, as it requires the ground to be broken up by repeated ploughings. The tobacco, though transplanted, needs one or two weedings and a hand-hoeing. It is frequently visited by the labourer to nip the heads of young plants, and afterwards to pick off the decayed leaves"<sup>87</sup>. Tobacco,

Succeeds best in strong soil, is sowed in Bhadun [August], transplanted in Assin [September-October] at the distance of one-fourth cubits and is ripe and cut down in Poose and Maug [December to February]. The plants as they rise to maturity (when about a cubit in height) are stript [sic] of their menus shoots and top allowing only from 10 to 15 leaves to remain as the state of the soil admits. The leaves are dried in the sun and then packed up for use<sup>88</sup>.

By nature tobacco required the richest, as well as the highest, soil in the village. In Rangpur, tobacco was invariably grown

"contiguous to the Ryotts houses where they can avail themselves of the assistance their families, in paying constant attention to the preparation of the Ground and the cleaning of the plants which is indispensably necessary"<sup>89</sup>.

Additionally,

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 30 May 1789.

<sup>87</sup> Colebrooke, *Remarks*, p. 75.

<sup>88</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, f. 37.

<sup>89</sup> IOR, BRP P/71/10, 1 June 1789.

"the goodness or badness of tobacco depends entirely on the care and attention paid to the cultivation of it & the time & labour & the expence of manure requisite to bring the ground in to a proper state of producing the greatest quantity of the best tobacco are very great"<sup>90</sup>.

This meant that many peasants did not undertake its cultivation. Thus in the 24-Parganas, "the ryott finds greater advantage by the culture of grain [as] tobacco grounds require much pains to be taken with them"<sup>91</sup>. The question here was those of resources and returns, and (like the cultivation of sugar cane and betel-leaf) merchants had a strong influence in production. Almost the entire tobacco output from Nadia was "produced by means of money supplied to the Ryotts by the Mahajans"<sup>92</sup>. Rangpur's tobacco was either directly financed, or was contracted for in advance, by the merchants of "Dacca, Moorshedabad, Jungypoor, Cutwah, Bogwongola, Chandernagore [and] Calcutta through their Gomasthas"<sup>93</sup>.

The output of tobacco leaves per *bigha* was as follows:

In Hughli	4 maunds
In Jessore	3 "
In Rangpur	3.41 "

While detailed historical studies exist on the production of cotton textiles in our period<sup>94</sup>, very little is known about the state of the cultivation of *copass*, raw

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 29 May 1789.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 1 June 1789.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 1 June 1789.

<sup>94</sup> For instance, D.B.Mitra, 1979; H.Hossain, 1988.

cotton, by the cultivators. According to Colebrooke, cotton was cultivated throughout Bengal, but the quantity produced was not enough to sustain the demand for cloth which had "given rise to a very large importation from the banks of the Jamuna and the Dakhin", and the reason was "[either] the increase of manufactures or decline of cultivation"<sup>95</sup>. There can be no doubt that there was an immense domestic and foreign demand for Bengal's cotton piecegoods in our period. More than 61 per cent of the Company's investments in 1788 were for cotton piecegoods<sup>96</sup>. The ratio of the Company's investments for raw silk and cotton were<sup>97</sup>:

1787	1: 3.3
1788	1: 2.7
1795	1: 2.8
1799	1: 3.5

There was furthermore the *internal* demand for cotton textiles. Colebrooke computed an annual production of cotton textiles worth 60 million rupees *circa* 1794 which was 10.21 times greater than the Company's investment for cotton piecegoods in 1788 and 9.15 times greater than the investment made in 1793<sup>98</sup>. These influences provide the reason for explaining the increasing imports of raw cotton from north and western India. In a survey of the cotton industry undertaken by the Company in 1789, the proportion

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<sup>95</sup> *Remarks*, p. 84.

<sup>96</sup> Total investment 9,596,698 rupees. Investment for piecegoods, 5,875,567 rupees [BRP, IOR P/70/49, 12 December 1788]. N.B. 1788 was a famine year.

<sup>97</sup> I am grateful to P.J. Marshall for providing the figures of investments in 1787. For other years see BRP, IOR P/70/49, 12 December 1788; N.K. Sinha, 1970: 1-3.

<sup>98</sup> The Company's investment for cotton in 1793 was 6,553,763 rupees [Sinha, 1965: 178-79].

of local production to imports showed the following significant trend<sup>99</sup>.

District	Annual requirement of <u>copass</u> (de-seeded, maunds)	Local (maunds)	Imported (maunds)
Birbhum and Bishnupur	37,000	20,000	17,000
Jessore	6,000	2,400	6,000
Rangpur	36,500	1,500	35,000
Nadia	16,800	4,000	12,000

The imports were principally *via* Patna, Mirzapur, and Surat<sup>100</sup>.

Such data must also indicate the unwillingness of the cultivators to increase the production of *copass* in order to meet the rising provincial demand. In fact, some areas (like the 24-Parganas, Tamruk Sylhet) practically grew no cotton at all<sup>101</sup>, in others (like Purnea) cotton production had actually declined<sup>102</sup>, while elsewhere (Dinajpur and Rangpur) the quality of cotton was at best of an "indifferent" kind<sup>103</sup>. Two sets of issues appear to have been of decisive importance to the peasants. First, there were the problems associated with limited resources and

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<sup>99</sup> There is much material relating to the imports of raw cotton in to Bengal in the proceedings of BRP, IOR P/71/10 and P/71/16. The evidence of imports in to Birbhum, Jessore, Rangpur and Nadia are from BRP, P/72/10, 15 June, 31 May, 1 June 1789.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 1 June 1789.

<sup>101</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/10, 20 May 1789, 29 May 1789, 31 May 1789.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 26 May 1789.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 1 June and 15 June 1789.

returns, as well of local soil conditions which influenced peasants not to extend the cultivated area for cotton despite the existing demand. The full implications of such considerations will be discussed below. Second, the prices of locally grown cotton were apparently much higher than for cotton which was imported. Cotton in the Deccan and northern India was "raised more cheaply than in Bengal, that it [supported] a successful competition, notwithstanding the heavy expenses of distant transport by land and water..."<sup>104</sup>. In fact one of the major reasons for the decline of cotton cultivation in Purnea was the relative cheapness of the cotton imported from Mirzapur and Patna "which undersells the cotton in Purnea"<sup>105</sup>.

The cultivation of *copass* show distinct intra-regional differences. Cotton produced in Dhaka was primarily of a superior variety called *nurmah* in order to feed the production of fine muslins there<sup>106</sup>, other districts tended to grow relatively inferior varieties, variously called *bhoga* and *muhree*, in order to meet the requirements of a largely indigenous demand<sup>107</sup>. The pull of production centres also influenced the cultivation of cotton in other districts. Thus in Sylhet, where cotton was only grown in small quantities "on the small hills", the peasants tried to cultivate *nurmah* cotton in order to supply Dhaka<sup>108</sup>, while in Burdwan, which supplied raw cotton to Birbhum, Rangpur, Nadia and Murshidabad, the emphasis was on the cultivation of *bhoga* and *muhree* cotton for manufacturing coarser cloths<sup>109</sup>.

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<sup>104</sup> Colebrooke, *Remarks*, p. 84.

<sup>105</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/10, 26 May 1789.

<sup>106</sup> IOR, BRP, P/71/16, 22 June 1789; Colebrooke, *Remarks*, p. 32; Marshall, 1987: 22.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., P/71/10, 26 May and 15 June 1789.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 31 May 1789.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 15 June 1789.

Despite its commercial importance, cotton occupied only a tiny fraction of individual peasant plots. A common expectation that richer peasants would tend to give a greater percentage of their lands to a an important cash crop like cotton is not fulfilled from Bengal's case. In their surveys the Company officials, to their surprise, found that peasants with relatively larger resources would devote at most one *bigha* of their land to it while the so-called "poorer class of ryotts" cultivated half or a quarter *bigha*<sup>110</sup>. Moreover cotton was seldom grown alone. Since the usual distance between each cotton plant was about two feet, the cultivator would plant the intervening spaces with "different kinds of grain, which being of a quicker growth is always reaped before"<sup>111</sup>. The cotton ground was also sown with turmeric or vegetables<sup>112</sup>. In Rangpur cotton and ginger were simultaneously grown on the same piece of land<sup>113</sup>.

At first sight such behaviour appears inexplicable. Here was a crop with an extensive, and increasing, demand, but there was no matching effort to increase the area under its cultivation. The reasons must therefore lie in considerations other than an purely commercial considerations. Soil was obviously a very important consideration. By nature cotton required a thick loamy soil "in a situation high and dry to admit of the water running easily off"<sup>114</sup>. The initial costs were high since:

The care required in its cultivation,  
the number of people employed in  
clearing the ground [and] keeping it  
continually free from weeds, destroying

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 15 June 1789.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/15, 28 January 1787.

<sup>113</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 4, f. 41-42.

<sup>114</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/10, 1 June 1789.

the insects which some quality in the plant breeds makes it not only expensive but equally laborious<sup>115</sup>.

Additionally, cotton was a precarious crop:

The plant itself being liable to many accidents, the culture of it is attended with much risk. A superfluity of rain rots & decays it & a drought kills it. And of so very delicate and tender nature it is, that even a few days of unseasonable weather so much hurts the growth & reduces the quantity of cotton, that the same number of plants which yield in one year 10 maunds will at another produce only 4<sup>116</sup>.

Very little is known about the output of *copass* from a *bigha* of land. Fragmentary information suggests that a *bigha* of land could yield crops ranging from 0.5 maunds (in Jessore), 2.5 maunds (in Midnapur) and about 5 maunds in Rajshahi<sup>117</sup>.

#### The rationality of peasant production

Figure 16 (p. 258) represents the sectoral contribution of different crops in the total agricultural output of the province *circa* 1794<sup>118</sup>. Food grains (rice, paddy and millet) comprised 45.5 percent of the output, whereas the cash crops (cotton, mulberry and tobacco)

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., P/71/16, 3 July 1789.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., P/71/10, 15 June 1789; *ibid.*, P/71/17, 21 December 1789.

<sup>118</sup> Colebrooke, *Remarks*, pp. 15-16.

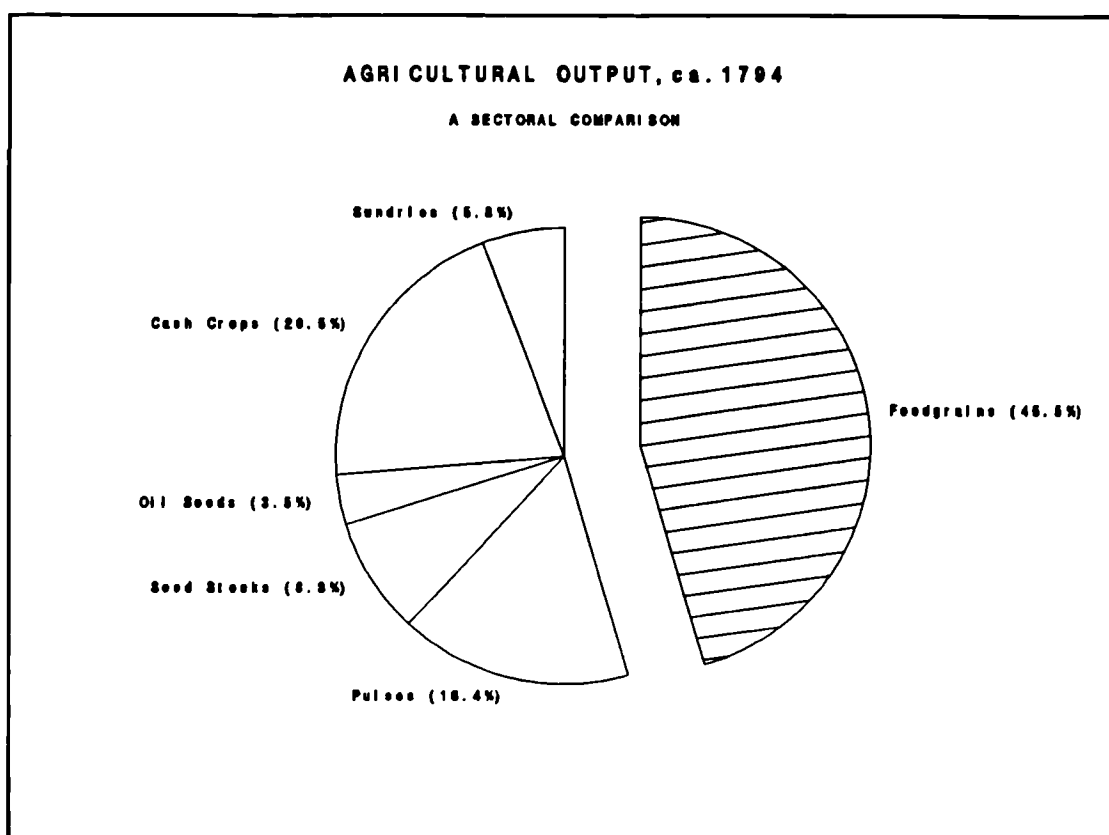


FIGURE 16

Source: Colebrooke, *Remarks*, pp.15-16.

contributed 20.5 per cent. Pulses and oil seeds, comprising about 20 per cent of total production, were certainly designed for sale, but they were not at par, in terms of exportable and commercial importance to crops like cotton and mulberry, and therefore may be seen as part of the overall production of food. The features of agricultural production as revealed by Colebrooke's estimates are also confirmed by some other contemporary observers<sup>119</sup> and from

<sup>119</sup> William Tennant, *circa* 1797, gave a much smaller proportion of the cultivated lands occupied by these cash crops: "most valuable crops" like "tobacco, sugar, indigo, cotton, mulberry and poppy" did not occupy more than "twentieth part of the land" under cultivation [*Indian Recreations*, 2, p.11].



scattered evidence available from specific districts.

Fragmentary data available for this seem to suggest that more than 60 percent of the cultivated land in central Bengal in the late 1770s was given over to the cultivation of the primary staples, rice and paddy<sup>120</sup>. *Pargana* Lashkarpur, in eastern Bengal, had a total agri-cultural output estimated at 324, 000 *maunds* in 1773, of this paddy constituted 272,000 *maunds*<sup>121</sup>. In 1787 Birbhum's gross agricultural output was valued at 32,78,156 rupees, of this 7,00,000 rupees was considered the value of crops for "manufacture produce", while the rest, 25,78,156 rupees, belonged to the out-turn from the lands producing rice and other grains<sup>122</sup>. Buchanan-Hamilton's surveys (*circa* 1807) suggest that nearly 90 percent of the arable land, yielding about 93 percent of the agricultural output, was given over to primary sector in Dinajpur, whereas in Rangpur, the turnover from this sector was 90.8 percent of the value of the gross produce<sup>123</sup>.

Unfortunately, the absence of measured area statistics for this period does not allow us to study the actual distribution of different crops on the cultivated land. Some data are nevertheless available. These are outlined in table 5.2 below.

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<sup>120</sup> Datta, 1986: 391-92.

<sup>121</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/44, 21 Dec. 1773.

<sup>122</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/40, 18 April 1788.

<sup>123</sup> Martin, 1976, vol. 3: Appendix C; IOL, MS. Eur. G. 11, table 40.

Table 5.2

Patterns of Cultivation in Bengal  
(selected areas, in *bighas*)

Year	Village/District	Total land <sup>a</sup>	Food grain <sup>b</sup>	Cash crops <sup>c</sup>	Unknown
1774	Gopalpur/Burdwan	129.16	87.65	12.5	29.01
1776	Rangamati/ Murshidabad	1272.9	688.5	269.85	314.55
1789	Swaruppur/ Rangpur	44731	37176.08	6941.12	613.80
1790	Pratappur/ Yusufpur	725.80	687.95	34.15	3.7
1790	Bheerche/ Yusufpur	452.1	398.4	43.95	9.75
1790	Prasadpur/ Yusufpur	275.86	224.4	46.15	5.31
1790	Odurpara/ Jessore	229.6	186.35	28.2	15.05
1790	Subankarati/ Jessore	168.5	112	45.55	10.95

<sup>a</sup>: Land actually under cultivation

<sup>b</sup>: Rice, paddy, wheat and millet

<sup>c</sup>: Mulberry, tobacco, cotton, lentils, opium, orchards

Source: WBSA, PCR Burdwan, vol.2, 26 September 1774; Ibid., Murshidabad, vol.8, 15 February 1776; BRC, IOR P/51/50, 4 September 1789; Ibid., P/52/3, 10 February 1794.

Such data certainly suggest that the agricultural landscape in eighteenth century Bengal was one where oceans of paddy fields were dotted with a few islands of commercial crops. This situation did not differ substantially even in those areas which constituted the

core suppliers for Bengal's textile industry. Thus in the major silk producing district of Rajshahi "there is no Ryott that does not hold Grain lands & in greater proportion than Mulberry ones"<sup>124</sup>. Peasant production near Qasimbazar was similarly structured as the following figures detailing the patterns of cultivation in the lands of eight peasants near that town show<sup>125</sup>:

Total lands held by eight *raiya*ts: 67.26 *bighas* of which:

Food grains	30.01 <i>bighas</i>
Mulberry	9.65 "
Lentils	24.7 "
Vegetables	2.9 "

The following evidence pertains to the land-use of Hari Das a *raiya*t of *mauza* Srirampur, *pargana* Muragatcha in the 24-Parganas in 1786<sup>126</sup>:

Total land	8.53 ( <i>bighas</i> )
Rice land	5.5 "
Cotton land	1.00 "
Lentils	2.01 "
Bamboo land	0.01 "
Pond & tank	0.01 "

Such evidence from a province which supplied more than 80 percent of the Company's annual trade in cotton piecegoods and silk textiles<sup>127</sup> must appear paradoxical. It

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<sup>124</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/10, 25 June 1789.

<sup>125</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/27, 28 November 1788.

<sup>126</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/66, 7 April 1786.

<sup>127</sup> See IOR Home Misc., vol. 401, pp. 138-141 for figures.

certainly appeared so to contemporary observers. The almost monotonous complaints regarding the "indolence" of the "native" peasant as a barrier to raising the productive capacity of the land and introducing "new" (i.e. European) methods of cultivation were essentially designed to show the intrinsic agricultural backwardness and technological deficiency of the average Indian peasant and to counterpose the supposedly superior European (specifically British) methods of cultivation and land-use. Central to this entire exercise was the assumption that the British cultivator was a rational economic agent who responded to the stimulus of the market, whereas the Indian (or Bengal's) peasant was not<sup>128</sup>. This raises the question of the rationality of peasant production in late eighteenth century Bengal.

Robert Kyd, the superintendent of the Company's Botanical Gardens on the outskirts of Calcutta (Sibpur) had the following to say about the possibilities of introducing new horticultural techniques in Bengal:

I can give the most positive assurances of this climate [of Bengal] admitting the resource derivable from the cultivation of Peach, Plumb, Apricot, Cherry; with the Chinese fruits Sytchy, Vampeen, Singeen, which succeed in perfection [in Bengal] and may in the process of a few years be *disseminated throughout the Company's possessions* if the Factory at Canton execute the Commission, lately sent, in furnishing a proper supply... .

I may further add that the culture of the English Melon and grapes of every kind, may be introduced with great success, altho' the latter will succeed better within the precincts of the Town [Calcutta], than in the neighbourhood of Calcutta, which from the lowness of the soil intense moisture and heat of the atmosphere in gendering innumerable insects which destroy the foliage in such a degree as to prevent their bearing. Add to this, the defect of the soil,

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<sup>128</sup> See for instance, Colebrooke, *Remarks*, pp. 27-30; Tennant, *Indian Recreations*, 2, pp. 8 ff.; Francis Gladwin to Council, BRC, IOR P/53/55, 31 January 1798; W. Roxburgh, "An Account of the Hindoo Method of Cultivating the Sugar Cane and Manufacturing the Sugar and Jagary in the Rajahmundry Sircar", in IOR Home Misc., vol. 210, p. 150.

which bears testimony of the element from which it has apparently emerged, apparently at no distant period of time, being strongly impregnated with salt<sup>129</sup>.

Kyd's remarks reveal that there were no deeply structured "cultural" barriers to the introduction of new products among the cultivators; after all the principal vehicle of Kyd's "positive assurances" of disseminating the new horticultural products "throughout the Company's possessions" would have been the peasant. Kyd additionally demonstrated that the receptiveness, or otherwise, to new products depended mainly on climatic and soil conditions, two vital elements in the rationale of peasant production.

To the European eye, the average peasant in Bengal appeared extremely cautious in choosing the crops to be sown and the extent of the land which was to be under a particular crop at any point in time. Cultivators "seldom engage in extraordinary speculations" was how their initial response to indigo cultivation was described in 1790<sup>130</sup>. From the cultivator's point of view this cautious approach to indigo was entirely justified for, apart from the coercion which its cultivation entailed, the production and marketing of this commodity was far from efficient, at least in our period: capital invested in indigo was often precarious, the interest rates were too high to be attractive, there was an absence of a ready market for indigo *within* Bengal and the sales of this commodity in European markets often suffered from excessive delays<sup>131</sup>.

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<sup>129</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/7, 8 June 1787; emphasis added.

<sup>130</sup> C. Blume, "Short Sketch of the Measures Adopted for the Introduction of Indigo and Promotion of Agriculture in Bengal Between 1779 and 1790", IOR, Home Misc., vol. 443, p. 600.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. The cultivation of poppy for opium was also largely unattractive to the average peasant in our period because poppy was an extremely precarious crop: "the poppy is of so delicate a texture before it arrives at maturity that an accident of the weather such as too dry a season, or  
(continued...)

Such cautiousness originated from the peasants perception of the risks involved in production, and their response was either an extremely slow acceptance<sup>132</sup> or an overt antipathy, and the latter was misconstrued as their "indolence" in official circles.

An antipathy of this type was demonstrated by the peasants to the Company's efforts of finding an Irish solution to problem of famine and dearth in Bengal, viz. , by the cultivation of potatoes on an extensive scale after the famine of 1788. Despite the apparently strenuous efforts made by officials to encourage the peasants to take to its culture by "offering seeds to any who would engage to cultivate them", they clearly failed "to prevail upon the Ryots to assist Government in its kind intentions [sic] in their favour". The fact that the peasants did not take to potatoes with the speed the Company desired immediately brought forth the charge of "native ignorance" and their "natural" unwillingness "to lend their aid to the cultivation of it". The real reasons of peasant antipathy were entirely different.

First, the potato seeds were extremely expensive: a maund of seed potatoes was priced at 4 rupees in October 1798. Second, the cultivators were not convinced of the suitability of potatoes to local soils. Those of Birbhum clearly stated that the soil there was "unfavourable of the plant thriving, and being brought to maturity in this district; the soil in general being formed of a hard

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<sup>131</sup>(...continued)

a tempest of wind and hail coming on before the plant has gathered sufficient strength to resist its force may utterly destroy the produce of a whole pergunnah" [BRC, IOR P/49/55, 11 August 1775].

<sup>132</sup> Thus according to William Roxburgh, "amongst the natives of India, the transitions from one stage of improvement to another are so exceedingly slow, as scarce to deserve the name... however when they see a certain prospect of gain, with little additional trouble, they have been frequently known to adopt our practices" [IOR, Home Misc., vol. 210, p. 150].

substance, and mixed with small stones or conker [*kankar* or gravel] renders it uncongenial for the culture of potatoes". The peasants of Dhaka objected to this item on grounds that "the soil is in general unfit for it and that in Bowal the only part of the district where good potatoes might be raised, the number of wild hogs is so great that their potato fields would be continually liable to the devastation of those destructive animals". Third, Bengal abounded in a number of:

Esculent roots of a farinaceous and nutritive quantity which are a common food among the lower class of people [such] as yams, the Spanish potatoes and the numerous varieties of Caychoo [*kochu*]... all extremely productive and... capable of being stored and preserved for a greater length of time by due attention to prevent the access of humidity.

These local tubers were naturally considered "more congenial and better adapted to the soil, and climate, and [therefore] less precarious in point of produce than potatoes". Yet some peasants did express their willingness to cultivate potatoes. In Coch Behar the *raiyat* appeared "extremely willing to extend the cultivation of potatoes, provided they are supplied with a sufficient quantity of seed in the first year"<sup>133</sup>.

Thus one of the key components of peasant production was their perception of risks. This attitude was entirely reasonable in the context of the late eighteenth century because of the almost continuous threats from famine and

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<sup>133</sup> The discussion of potatoes in eighteenth century is based on the evidence in BRC, IOR P/53/55, 29 January 1798, 12 February 1798, and 23 March 1798; *ibid.*, P/53/58, 28 September 1798. In Midnapur the cultivation of *shakkarkand* (sweet potatoes) was an important part of agriculture. The seeds for this tuber were sown in the month of *Kartik* (October-November), the tuber was reaped in *Pous* (December-January) [*Ibid.*, P/51/15, 28 January 1788].

dearth to their subsistence and production. Risk avoidance was certainly one important reason behind the preponderance of rice and paddy in cultivated lands. Corn (i.e. rice and paddy), noted Colebrooke:

Though not equally profitable with dearer articles [i.e. cash crops] serves to alleviate the risk attending the cultivation of them; for they [the "dearer" articles] seem precarious in exact proportion to the greatness of the profit which they are expected to afford. On the failure of his mulberry or his sugar cane, the peasant, had he no corn, must suffer the extremities of want; but raising in that and other grain a sufficiency for mere subsistence, he can wait the supply of his other wants from the success of other cultures; or, he can reserve a hoard from the crop of a successful year to meet the difficulties of one that is calamitous<sup>134</sup>

Nevertheless it would be wrong to assume that Bengal's agriculture was entirely a risk-prevention enterprise. Under conditions of relative normality, average peasants could be seen attempting to try their hands at cultivating the "dearer" and "precarious articles" of production. In Jangipur for instance, cultivators often strove to strike a workable balance, on their lands, between cash-crops and the cultivation of essential staples. Here a strain of jute known as *cooch mardum paat* and paddy were sown on the same lands "adjoining to each other" because *paat* "will bear a length of Drought which would destroy the Grain, nor does it suffer from excessive rains", so that "in case of the failure of one, from casualties of weather, the whole together may yield him a profit". Interestingly, there was very little mulberry grown in Jangipur despite the soil being "well adapted to the Mulberry plant"; and the reasons

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<sup>134</sup> *Remarks*, p. 67.



for this were that mulberry required relatively larger amounts of capital, and that its cultivation was susceptible to frequent losses caused by weather or by "disasters to the silk worms"<sup>135</sup>.

In a highly commercialized economy as that of Bengal in our period, it was natural for peasants to realize the commercial potential of different crops and, circumstances permitting, to attempt to cultivate for a market. Conducting an enquiry in to the agricultural conditions of *pargana* Baldakhal in eastern Bengal, J.Patterson had the following to say about the peasant's choice of crops:

Cotton in this district is an article of universal cultivation, for the Ryot whose land is not favourable to the produce, provides himself with cotton land in some other place more proper for its growth<sup>136</sup>.

In 1788-89, the Company made enquiries about the cultivation of plants yielding a yellow dye "possessing the Quality of Madder". The description of this dye from Birbhum is revealing:

From the small fibre of the root of the tree cultivated in this district, called Auch, a yellow dye is extracted; and of which should it be found to answer the purpose of Madder, large quantities may be obtained, as on its becoming an Article of Demand, the *Ryotts will not fail to increase the cultivation of it*<sup>137</sup>.

In September 1792 the Board of Revenue ordered the

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<sup>135</sup> M. Atkinson, Resident, Jangipur Factory, 21 November 1792, IOR Home Misc., vol. 375, p. 318.

<sup>136</sup> 15 June 1789, IOR Home Misc., vol. 385, p. 325.

<sup>137</sup> BRP, P/71/10, 15 June 1789; emphasis added.

district collectors to make the peasants and merchants become more aware of the advantages of this crop since "in future the demand for this commodity will be such as to yield to them an ample profit on any quantity that may be brought to the market". A positive response to the stimulus of a market was anticipated:

*If the profit accruing from this increased price is in the first instance secured to the Cultivators, there can be no doubt of their extending their plantations to such an extent as in the course of few years will enable this country to export large quantities of sugar not only to England, but to different parts of India where the commodity is in demand*<sup>138</sup>.

Though the exact details of governmental efforts in the cultivation of sugar cane are absent, we are reasonably certain about the expansion in the cultivation of another cash crop, jute (*sona paat*), in Rangpur in our period. The first inquiries regarding the state of jute cultivation in Rangpur were made in 1794, which were rather imprecise both about output and lands under cultivation<sup>139</sup>. For the greater part of our period at least *paat* was cultivated almost entirely by the fishermen on small spots of land for making nets<sup>140</sup>, but by the first decade of the nineteenth century the cultivation of jute had doubled in Rangpur because of the "demand from Europe and the advances given by the Company"<sup>141</sup>.

The case of betel-nut cultivation in Chittagong is revealing in this regard. Here, and despite being a highly

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., P/72/7, 19 September 1792; emphasis added.

<sup>139</sup> IOR, Home Misc., vol. 375, 9 June 1794, p. 118.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 288

<sup>141</sup> Buchanan, "Ronggoppur", IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 2, f. 42.

taxed crop, its cultivation was spreading rapidly in the last decades of the century:

Owing probably to the great number of Burma boats that now come here and supply themselves... in place of importing the betel from Sumatra [and] every man is planting the [betel-nut] tree around his house<sup>142</sup>.

Thus the average peasant of our period blended an attitude of extreme caution with a healthy regard for commercial profit. But these peasants, like all producers, functioned in a material milieu which was usually beyond their power to control, and the influence of this environment was critical in determining the specific features of agricultural production and its social content.

#### The so-called "inefficiency" of Bengal's agriculture

For western observers agricultural production in our period was extremely inefficient. Bengal's peasants did not use manure in adequate quantities to raise productivity from land, they did not practice fallowing in order to restore the natural vitality of the soil, and had no knowledge of crop rotation of the type (fodder--cereal--fodder) which was practiced by the peasants in eighteenth century Europe. These were listed as some of the major "imperfections of husbandry"<sup>143</sup> in order to explain, what was considered by these observers to be the essential backwardness of Bengal's (and Asian) agriculture.

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<sup>142</sup> Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 19286, f.4.

<sup>143</sup> See for instance, Colebrooke, *Remarks*, pp.22-25; Tennant, *Indian Recreations*, 2, pp.11 ff.

The fact that the greatest portion of cultivated land, under rice, was not extensively manured<sup>144</sup>, except naturally, was very much in keeping with the intrinsic nature of rice. Rice cultivation depends almost exclusively on adequate water supplies for most of its nutrients, and the area under wet-rice therefore is not dependent on large supplies of manure. Additionally, the fertilizing power of water enables the fields to be cultivated continuously without fallowing<sup>145</sup>. Our discussion has shown that the deposits of silt and rotting vegetation (*douk*) left by the seasonal inundations was enough to give successive rice harvests without the need for any additional, or artificial, manures.

Nevertheless manuring was practiced for those crops which needed to be manured. Unfortunately, practically nothing is known about manuring practices in different districts but a comparison of Robert Kyd's survey of the western side of the Hughli river with Buchanan's survey of Rangpur does show certain common features. Leaving the roots of a previous harvest to rot in the ground was a commonly used natural manure for the cultivation of the *aman* rice. Burning the rooted stubble of one crop and then ploughing in its ashes for the next was another widespread form of manuring used for the cultivation of rice and lentils. More elaborate, and costly, forms of manure were used for cultivating sugar cane, cotton, tobacco and betel-leaf. Here expressed oil-seed (especially mustard) cakes were mixed with the top soil and then evenly distributed over the beds and rows in order to provide additional nutrients to the plant and to replenish the soil

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<sup>144</sup> F.Buchanan, "An Account of a Journey Through the Provinces of Chittagong and Tipperah, 1798", Brit.Mus.Add.Ms. 19286, f.2.

<sup>145</sup> D.H.Grist, 1975: 38; Bray, 1983: 9.

subsequently<sup>146</sup>. Marling, or dressing lighter soils with clay or loamy earth in order to enable them to retain water and manure near the surface, was not in vogue ("the use of the earth from marshes and ditches is very little, if at all, practiced")<sup>147</sup>, probably because of the costs involved, which could be prohibitive<sup>148</sup>; and this can perhaps be ascribed as one likely cause for preventing the spread of cotton cultivation in our period.

"The Indian allows [the land] a lea, but never a fallow" was Tennant's way of describing the absence of fallowing by the peasant of Bengal<sup>149</sup>. Apart from showing that lands in Bengal were intensively cultivated, Tennant's statement also demonstrates the essential divergence between Bengal's (or South Asia's) agriculture from that of contemporary Europe. In Europe, fallowing was essential to restore the fertility of the heavy and wet clay soil after two or three years of successive cropping. Here fallowing was more than giving some respite to the land; it also entailed successive ploughings to break the surface thoroughly and get rid of weeds<sup>150</sup>. Obviously this process tended to raise costs of production and by the end of the seventeenth century, the rigid rotation of two crops and a fallow had come to be recognized as one of the major

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<sup>146</sup> See IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, f. 30-35 and IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 4, f. 82-83.

<sup>147</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, f. 82; see J. D. Chambers and G. E. Mingay, 1966: 62-63 for marling in eighteenth century English agriculture.

<sup>148</sup> Marling as a device to improve the quality of lighter soils was not an extensive feature of English agriculture before the mid-eighteenth century because of the almost prohibitive costs [see C. G. A. Clay, 1984: 112]. Marling seems to have expanded in the late eighteenth century, and along with manuring, drainage and convertible husbandry, it constituted one of the four major sources of agricultural improvement in that period [Chambers and Mingay, 1966: 62].

<sup>149</sup> *Indian Recreations*, 2, p. 16.

<sup>150</sup> Chambers and Mingay, 1966: 49.

problems in the way of raising the productivity of land in Europe<sup>151</sup>. In contrast fallowing was not an important feature of Bengal's agriculture because the soil here was more amenable, i.e., it could be broken up more easily by "scratching the superficies of the earth". In such situations, fallowing would mean an unnecessary loss of output and unduly high average costs of production<sup>152</sup>.

Nevertheless, the awareness that lands tend to get exhausted by repeated cultivation, and that it needs some rest to recuperate was well developed in Bengal. Crops like sugar cane, cotton and mulberry sapped the land after three successive harvests, and lands bearing these crops were rejuvenated in a four-yearly cycle. In lands bordering upon the Hughli river, such lands were fallowed for about a year during which time "the ground is restored with manure and fresh soil... and exposed once a month by the plough to the influence of the Atmosphere"<sup>153</sup>. In parts of Rangpur:

4 years fallow are usually allowed after 2 crops. The first year the ploughing is rather difficult, and the grass roots require to be collected and burnt; but on the whole the trouble of cultivation on such lands is exceedingly small, and the crops are good. The land is fallow for two or three years, and produces abundance of grass, but it is of a wretched quality<sup>154</sup>.

However, compared to Europe, the practice of fallowing

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<sup>151</sup> W. Abel, 1980: 109, 208; C.G.A. Clay, 1984: 113; Chambers and Mingay, 1966: 49.

<sup>152</sup> Significantly these were precisely the considerations which were increasingly reducing the importance of the fallow in English agriculture from the late eighteenth century [see Chambers and Mingay, 1966: *passim*].

<sup>153</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, ff. 36-37.

<sup>154</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 4, f. 84.

was undertaken on a much smaller scale in Bengal. Here only a tiny fraction of lands producing selected crops were actually fallowed, whereas in Europe fallowing meant that from a quarter to a third of the arable was made to lie unused for up to three or even four years<sup>155</sup>.

The reasons why some European observers (for instance Colebrooke and Tennant) noted an absence of crop-rotation in Bengal are unclear. Contemporary European agricultural practices appear to have been conducted basically on a three-course-- cereal, fodder, cereal-- rotation of crops, though in some parts, for instance in Flanders, twelve-course rotations had been introduced by 1800; the so-called Norfolk system of rotation (turnips, barley, clover and wheat) was being gradually extended in to the rest of England along with an increasing tendency to cultivate part of the fallow with fodder crops<sup>156</sup>. Evidence from Bengal does suggest a fairly widespread existence of crop rotation. The simplest form was the rotation of rice and lentils on relatively lower lands, on higher lands rice and mustard were sown in regular succession. *Sih-fasli* (three harvest) lands, usually of the best intrinsic quality, produced rice with either two crops of oil-seeds or lentils, or they were used for producing successive crops of mustard, cotton and lentils in a regular annual rotation<sup>157</sup>. In fact Buchanan listed "alternate cropping" as one principal agricultural practice to prevent soil-exhaustion in parts of Rangpur<sup>158</sup>. Interestingly, alternate cropping, or the sequential use of fodder crops and corn crops to obviate fallowing (also called convertible husbandry) had only just started spreading to the enclosed and fairly large farms of England

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<sup>155</sup> Chambers and Mingay, 1966: 49.

<sup>156</sup> W. Abel, 1980: 207-8.

<sup>157</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/15, 28 January 1787; also IOL, Ms. Eur. F. 95, ff. 30-35.

<sup>158</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 4, f. 83.

in the late eighteenth century<sup>159</sup>.

### Agricultural production: the role of specific factors

To say that agricultural production in any particular pre-industrial society depended upon a specific combination of natural conditions, productive resources and the tax regime would perhaps be commonplace, but, as will be discussed, this mixture was crucial in the context of late eighteenth century Bengal. As pointed to earlier, the ordinary peasant certainly had an eye for profit, but the evidence unequivocally shows that cultivation was essentially geared to the production of food, often at the expense of other more commercial crops. Such evidence certainly requires detailed analysis. P. J. Marshall's suggestion that for the cultivator the balance of advantages and disadvantages in the cultivation of various, particularly cash, crops was more complex than a mere response to an underlying profit motive<sup>160</sup> further highlights the need to place the specific influences on agricultural production in proper perspective.

One of the important factors in determining the kind of crops peasants sowed on their lands was revenue. The fact that lands devoted to the cultivation of cash crops were subjected to a greater tax squeeze than those sown with food grains is a commonly known fact. In Midnapur lands producing three cash crops (mulberry, cotton and tobacco) a year were assessed at 10.19 rupees *bigha* whereas rice lands paid only 3.375 rupees *bigha* in 1774<sup>161</sup>. The

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<sup>159</sup> Chambers and Mingay, 1966: 61.

<sup>160</sup> Marshall, 1987: 170.

<sup>161</sup> WBSA, PCR Burdwan, vol.1, 30 May 1774.



average rate of revenue for cash crops in Birbhum was 1.35 rupees per *bigha*, while rice and paddy lands paid no more than 0.375 rupee in 1787<sup>162</sup>. In 24-Parganas the difference in the rates of assessment between rice and lands growing cash crops could range from 2.4 rupees to 0.50 rupee depending on the crop being assessed<sup>163</sup>. In Muhammadshahi, the revenue of the *aman* (winter) rice land was 2 rupees and the lands producing tobacco paid 3 rupees per *bigha* in 1789<sup>164</sup>. Obviously higher rates of revenue reflected higher returns which could be anticipated from cash crop, but such rates nevertheless had a definite impact on patterns of cultivation.

The prime consideration here was not merely the pitch of the revenue demand (though that was important) but the apparent tendency in the late eighteenth century for that demand to fall *regressively* on cash crops. Thus while the Board of Revenue, while observing the potential of extending the cultivation of sugar cane in the province (cited above) was equally keen to prevent:

The landholders... from deriving an advantage by raising the rates of pottahs of the sugar cane lands instead of looking to the extension of the sugar plantations for an increase of the rents of their Estates [which] would not only be unjust as well as repugnant... but entirely counteract the beneficial effects.

The Board's logic clearly was that if taxes were regressively raised on the cultivation of cash crops, the "cultivators will derive no advantage, the quantity of land [under sugar cane] will diminish, and its price will be

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<sup>162</sup> WBDR, *n.s.*, *Birbhum*, op.cit., 16 August 1787.

<sup>163</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/66, 7 April 1786.

<sup>164</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/10, 15 June 1789; *ibid.*, P/71/22, 22 March 1790.

exorbitant as it will include the amount of additional tax on land"<sup>165</sup>. These fears were quite justified as is shown in the case of some peasants in the 24-Parganas who, in 1780, attempted to plant tobacco on what were previously rice growing lands. The *zamindars* were quick to seize upon the financial opportunity opened up by such a move and refused to "receive the Malguzarry according to the established Jummah [i.e. for rice land] but insisting on paying our malguzarry *increased* account in tobacco lands"<sup>166</sup>.

The *zamindars* were not alone in such matters. Though the Company tended to blame these *zamindars* for regressive taxation, its own attitudes towards revenue did not differ substantially. In fact, the important reasons for the decline in production of mulberry in Rajshahi in the 1780s were the high costs of cultivation and the financial predicament of the "poor Ryott who is *allowed no remission in his rents*", to which were added the problems created by the famine of 1788<sup>167</sup>. In Burdwan, "the cultivation of the mulberry plant has of the late years much decreased... & one principal cause of this decrease has been owing to the very exorbitant rent demanded from the farmer some of [whom] pay so high as 14, 16 or even 18 rupees per Beggah"<sup>168</sup>. A similar position was faced by the *chassars* of Midnapur. The revenue squeeze was listed as an important cause in the decline in mulberry cultivation in the *parganas* of Cossijura, Narajol and Midnapur because:

The annual amount of the revenue of their [*chassars*] Mulberry lands ought properly to be paid in installments in

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<sup>165</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/7, 19 September 1792.

<sup>166</sup> *Arzi* of "Sundry Ryotts of 24 Pergunnahs" in CCR, IOR P/68/3, 6 March 1780.

<sup>167</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/10, 25 June 1789; emphasis added.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 June 1789.

no less time than twelve months, but they are compelled to pay it in nine<sup>169</sup>.

The influence of revenue on production is also made clear from the case of cotton cultivation in Chittagong during the eighteenth century. Under the *Nizamat*, the cultivators of Chittagong had enjoyed concessional terms of revenue to the extent that "no distinction exist[ed] in regard to Publick [sic] Revenue between cotton [growing] lands and such as [were] appropriated to the cultivation of rice"; the cultivators paid revenue "thro' the channel of their zemindarries an annual revenue agreeable to the established rates of assessment throughout the province", and they were "not subject to any enhanced demands of revenue in case they [appropriated] their lands to the cultivation of cotton in lieu of rice". Given such concessional terms of revenue, the cultivators of Chittagong shifted from cotton to rice and *vice versa* "*ad libitum* as the prospect of an advantageous sale, or more frequently, their own private wants and emergencies induced them". The situation seems to have changed during the course of the second half of the century, when despite "the profits arising from the cultivation of this article [cotton] being greater than those arising from the cultivation of Rice... [*its*] cultivation has not become more general"<sup>170</sup>.

Other factors were the capital costs involved in the cultivation of cash crops and the critical shortage of productive resources in the hands of the small-peasants. We are told that the estimated cost of cultivating mulberry in Murshidabad varied from five to six rupees per *bigha* under normal circumstances in 1771; during unfavourable seasons, the cost rose to ten and even fifteen rupees. Cultivating

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., P/71/11, 25 June 1789.

<sup>170</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/16, 26 November 1789; emphasis added.

grain was much cheaper: under favourable conditions it varied from one to two rupees and rose at most to three rupees per *bigha* when conditions were not so conducive<sup>171</sup>. In other words, the expenditure on cultivation of grain in Murshidabad, on an average, was 72.72 per cent less than the cost of cultivating mulberry during normal years; during unfavourable seasons it was 76 per cent less. By 1780 the costs of cultivating a *bigha* of land with mulberry around Murshidabad had gone up to 21 rupees in the first year, 9 rupees in the second and a further 17 rupees were required in the third year as recurring expenses to maintain production. After three successive years of cultivation the soil would become exhausted and "the whole process is renewed on fresh ground"<sup>172</sup>.

In 1789, the comparative costs of cultivation in *pargana* Baldakhal were as follows<sup>173</sup>:

Crop	Cost of cultivation (rupees per <i>bigha</i> )
Two successive rice harvests ( <i>do-shari</i> ):	2.30
One crop of rice ( <i>ek-shari</i> ):	1.75
Millet:	1.69
Gram:	1.06
Lentils:	1.50
Peas:	0.44
Oil seed ( <i>til</i> ):	1.75
Mustard seed:	0.37

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<sup>171</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol.1, 11 November 1771.

<sup>172</sup> CCR, IOR P/68/7, 4 May 1781.

<sup>173</sup> J. Paterson to Board, BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1789.

Cotton:	4.62
Sugar cane:	12.62

In Dinajpur, the average cost of cultivating food grain was two rupees a *bigha*, that of mulberry was 7.44 rupees, whereas the capital stock required for the cultivation of a betel-leaf garden (usually half a *bigha* in size) was 168 rupees plus a maintenance cost of 73.62 rupees per year<sup>174</sup>. From the figures given by Colebrooke, the all-Bengal average cost of cultivating a *bigha* of land with different crops works out as follows: grain, 2 rupees; tobacco, 4 rupees; and mulberry, 15.25 rupees<sup>175</sup>.

These cost differentials were almost prohibitive for peasants already suffering from scanty resources and heavy tax burdens. In Murshidabad, "the extreme poverty of the Natives induces them to forego the prospect of greater advantages involving... the cultivation of cotton than of rice or other sorts of grain"<sup>176</sup>. In Rajshahi, "the lands employed in Mulberry require much labour time and expence to fit them for the purpose that which the poor Ryott who lives from hand to mouth can seldom afford"<sup>177</sup>. In Rangpur, "the Mulberry Plant is not cultivated in every Mehal, for every Ryott does not engage in it. To prepare and bring into cultivation, land proper for the Mulberry is attended with an increase of expence to the Ryotts"<sup>178</sup>. "The poverty of the people is the principal impediment to the culture of cotton" in Sylhet<sup>179</sup>, and in Dinajpur, "the gain resulting to the Ryott in rearing this article [cotton], can only be

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<sup>174</sup> Martin, 1976, vol. 3: 831-32, 870-71, 864-65.

<sup>175</sup> *Remarks*, pp. 62, 65, 75, 92.

<sup>176</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/16, 3 June 1789.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, P/71/10, 25 June 1789.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 June 1789.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 June 1789.

judged by comparison & the proportion this culture bears to that of Grain, leads to a conclusion that the Ryott finds considerably more advantage in cultivating the latter than the former"<sup>180</sup>. Finally in Jessore:

The greatest disadvantages under which the culture of cotton plant labour are the general unfavourableness of the sale [i.e marketing] & the want of means in the Ryots to defray the charges of cultivation which it appears are great... . There is land enough to push the cultivation to a considerable extent if the Ryots had the necessary means; but poverty reduces them to the necessity of raising crops upon them, less expensive in the process of culture & [which] afford a more speedy return<sup>181</sup>

In Nadia "the cultivation of sugar cane is very expensive and requires a capital which the generality of Ryots do not possess"<sup>182</sup>. The major barriers to the extension of sugar cane cultivation were described by James Prinsep in the following words:

Nothing seems to oppose an immediate and great increase of sugars here [in Bengal], but the disinclination of the Ryots to speculate upon future contingencies, which they cannot comprehend [sic], and their individual poverty, which forbids them to undertake what they cannot accomplish<sup>183</sup>.

These descriptions sum up the constraints upon the

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 26 May 1789.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 15 June 1789.

<sup>182</sup> BRP, P/72/10, 26 December 1792.

<sup>183</sup> *Bengal Sugar*, op.cit., p.53.

bulk of the peasantry which were of fundamental importance to the *economics* of small-peasant production in our period.

Finally, one has to consider the impact of dearth and famine on agricultural production and on the agrarian economy in general. In fact it would not be wrong to state that the influence of famine and dearth on the economy was *the* most vital factor in determining the state of agrarian economy and the nature of land-use for agricultural production. They were also the major factors in shaping peasant-merchant linkages in the production of food-grains.

#### Famine, dearth and peasant production

The famine of 1769/70 was, among other things, a critical blow on the productive resources of all categories of peasants, and the price situation for the next three years in the worst affected districts did not recompense the losses suffered. Agricultural prices came down quite quickly once the worst had passed. By September 1770 they had started coming down in Rangpur owing to a "flourishing" crop there<sup>184</sup>; a "most plentiful crop" had also eased the pressure of high prices upon the "surviving inhabitants" in the entire belt between Burdwan and Murshidabad by November 1770<sup>185</sup>. Instead of steadying after that, prices of foodgrains crashed continuously between 1771 and 1773 in the famine hit districts. At Purnea, prices had plummeted from 1.33 rupees a maund in 1771 to 0.33 rupees a maund in 1773, whereas the prices of inferior quality grains had come down from 0.50 maunds in 1772 to 0.14 rupees a maund

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<sup>184</sup> FR, Murshidabad, IOR G/27/1, 26 September 1770.

<sup>185</sup> Brit. Mus., Add. Ms. 45438, 1 November 1770, f. 14.

in 1773<sup>186</sup>.

Similar slumps were reported from Rangpur<sup>187</sup> and Dinajpur<sup>188</sup>. The reasons for such low prices were ascribed to excess harvests and "want of purchasers"; for the Company this at once raised the now familiar prospect of a delayed payment of revenue. The cheapness of grain was such that many of the "petty zemindars and ryotts" were ruined, and large numbers of peasants in Purnea had taken flight to the neighbouring district of Tirhut "and those who remain are unwilling to start cultivation"<sup>189</sup>. In Rangpur, the "excessive cheapness of every article of life" in 1772 had "proportionably" reduced "the value of the lands"<sup>190</sup>.

The problems created by the famine of 1769/70 for Bengal's agrarian economy were compounded by the subsequent instances of dearth and by the famine of 1788. Dearth was short-run crises of subsistence caused by localized or partial harvest failures, and interspersed, as these were, between two major famines, dearth created unstable conditions in the productive enterprise of the province's small-peasant economy. Such conditions were re-enforced because of the virtual absence of state help in nursing a crippled economy or to ameliorate the conditions of the peasantry by providing some form of financial assistance. The failure of the state either to design a cogent famine-relief policy or to create state-operated channels of agricultural credit was accepted by the Company after the famine of 1788 in the following words

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<sup>186</sup> Compare WBSA, CCRM, vol. 3, 25 January 1771 and WBSA, Circuit at Purnea, 2 February to 9 February 1773, p. 8.

<sup>187</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/40, 26 June 1773 and *ibid.*, P/49/46, 31 May 1774.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, P/49/40, 14 January 1773.

<sup>189</sup> WBSA, Circuit at Purnea, 2 February to 9 February 1773, pp. 2, 12

<sup>190</sup> From C. Purling to Warren Hastings in IOR P/68/54, 10 August 1772.



The most active temporary interference of Government in the famines has been found productive of no other consequence than a slight alteration of the pressure on the poorer class of natives<sup>191</sup>.

The absence of institutional assistance, the unrelenting influence of weather upon agricultural production and the almost chronic shortage of resources meant that the average peasants in Bengal found it impossible to make a self-induced recovery, on their own assets, even after one harvest failure. The price situation during and after such harvest-disasters also worked against the producers. Bad agricultural seasons were also times of high food-prices but these prices posed problems of survival for the peasantry because of the inexorable revenue squeeze. The fact that cultivators had to buy their food in such times meant that they were under the double pressure of meeting the state's financial claims and finding money for their survival under extremely adverse conditions and drastically curtailed incomes.

It is true that a dearth was not cataclysmic enough to cause excess mortality, but it was serious enough to pose a number of problems. There was the problem of subsistence. A dearth did not cause an absolute reduction in the quantity of food at the provincial level, but there was nevertheless a severe food-availability decline at local levels which consequently raised the spot prices of rice and paddy up to a point where the local poor were unable to purchase their subsistence. Obviously people ate into their seed reserves. The result was their subsequent inability to sustain production in the next agricultural season. A dearth therefore meant severe strains on the "present subsistence and future occupation" of the cultivators<sup>192</sup>,

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<sup>191</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/22, 15 August 1788.

<sup>192</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/58, 22 April 1785.

a symptom which was a cause of, and intensified, the shortage of resources in the hands of the small-peasantry.

The climatic origins of dearth also had a significant bearing upon the state of agricultural production in the affected areas. Floods meant that the standing crops were washed away and arable land was damaged either because the waters did not recede quickly enough, or the lands became over-silted<sup>193</sup>. In either case, and despite their best efforts, the producers found it extremely difficult to bring these lands back into cultivation after the worst had passed. Droughts, on the other hand, made the crops wither. They also parched the arable, thereby making the act of ploughing a very difficult task<sup>194</sup>.

Droughts also meant that water levels in the rivers receded drastically, thereby throwing-up sand-beds (*chars*) to which the cultivators turned in the hope of getting a crop of low-grade rice<sup>195</sup>. What is not clear however is the extent to which these lands could compensate for the losses

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<sup>193</sup> Thus a partial flood in eastern Bengal (in 1773) caused by the Padma and Burril rivers:

Not only... destroy[ed] the harvest on the ground and swe[pt] away whole villages [thereby] ruining the Ryotts & occasioning great desertion; but when the waters subsided, they left large tracts of land which was before cultivated, entirely choked up with sand & so impoverished as to preclude all hopes of bringing it again into cultivation (BRC, IOR P/49/44, 29 December 1773).

The flood of 1783 caused similar damage to crops and lands in Dhaka [see Islam (ed.), *Bangladesh District Records*, op.cit., 10 July 1784, pp.77-81].

<sup>194</sup> Droughts invariably meant that "the sowing lands are waste, the arable not ploughed" (WBSA, PCR Murshidabad, vol.7, 4 December 1775). The drought of 1791 had rendered, "the whole soil harder & more cracked than it generally is" (BRP, IOR P/71/45, 16 November 1791).

<sup>195</sup> See BRC, IOR P/51/40, 15 July 1789 for a description of the types of *chars* in Bengal. Such lands were invariably the cause of intense disputes between the *zamindars* as they "claim the property thereof as annexed to their respective lands" (Ibid.).

suffered in the more productive spots of land, or the degree to which the output from the *chars* could alleviate the prospect of semi-starvation during a drought. On the whole, the possibilities of easing localized food shortages by cultivating *chars* appears remote for a variety of reasons.

First, *chars* were not fixed. They shifted from season to season. These lands were fertile, but production on them was uncertain as it invariably depended upon "the next change of the rivers"<sup>196</sup>. Second, the established arable was severely damaged by a drought, and the *chars* could hardly have compensated, in terms of output, for the losses suffered<sup>197</sup>. Third, cash crops, like cotton, mulberry and tobacco could not be grown on *char* lands. Therefore the problems created by droughts (or by floods) for the rural artisans remained unrelenting. Such problems were compounded in those areas which did not produce all three rice harvests. For instance the district of Hijli<sup>198</sup> did not produce any *aus* or *boro* rice; it depended almost exclusively on the *aman* harvest, and upon imports from other rice producing areas for its domestic consumption<sup>199</sup>.

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<sup>196</sup> Buchanan, "Ronggoppur", IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 74, vol. 1, book 1, f. 109.

<sup>197</sup> *Chars* were also caused by erosion, when rivers "sweep large tracts of country in some places and deposit it in others" [BRP, IOR P/70/26, 16 March 1787] so "one persons property is carried away and another's enlarged" [Buchanan, "Ronggoppur", IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 74, f. 109], but the net results of such shifts were fluctuating and often reduced the lands for arable purposes, reasons which were instrumental in causing the landed-proprietors to clash with each other [Ibid., f. 110; BRP, IOR P/72/6, 22 June 1792; BRC, IOR P/53/58, 14 December 1798].

<sup>198</sup> Hijli was a major salt producing area and therefore had a sizeable concentration of artisans.

<sup>199</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/38, 2 December 1791.

*Boro* rice was not grown in Purnea, Burdwan and in Midnapur<sup>200</sup>. Thus when unfavourable weather curtailed output, alternative strategies of cultivation were inevitably inadequate.

Apart from trying to cultivate the *chars*, droughts also meant that the peasants tended to concentrate on the *jala* (low lying) land as a last ditch effort to procure a harvest from their established arable<sup>201</sup>. Of course the degree to which such strategies succeeded depended on the intensity of the current drought. During the drought of 1791, the water-courses in Hijli dried up; cultivated lands which depended upon the moisture and sediments (*douk*) left on the *jala* lands by seasonal inundations became parched; thus the cultivators were unable to "derive any advantage from which their future cultivation can be ameliorated"<sup>202</sup>. A similar situation was reported from the district of 24-Parganas which had largely escaped the horrors of the 1769 famine "owing entirely to its situation, which being low retained what rainfall and enabled the people to water and preserve their crops"<sup>203</sup>. But in 1791:

In the higher parts which dried up first, the rice plants are burnt up in the same size as they were originally transplanted. In the center parts where the plants have grown to some height, the ears which have formed are perfectly empty husks without any possibility of producing grain. In the lowest parts which [were] the longest moist have been long since entirely dry, the few ears of grain which have filled have a very sickly appearance & cannot on largest calculation realize

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<sup>200</sup> See BRP, IOR P/70/40, Appendix to Proceedings of April 1788 for a detailed list of types of rice produced in different districts of Bengal.

<sup>201</sup> Turning to *jala* lands during floods was impossible as these lands were the first to be submerged.

<sup>202</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/38, 2 December 1791.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., P/49/52, 7 April 1775.

one-fourth of the usual crop<sup>204</sup>

Dearth in late eighteenth century Bengal had profoundly destabilizing effects on the state of agricultural production and on the productive enterprises of the peasantry at localized levels. The fact that they occurred periodically after a major famine in 1769 meant that there was very little respite provided to the producers to recoup their losses, or to reclaim and extend production on their own initiative. The best spots of land<sup>205</sup>, which produced the most valuable crops and were the most productive, were immediately lost. This meant that the producers were pushed into cultivating marginal lands, which were relatively fertile but essentially inadequate to meet current requirements of food and income in the contest of sharply spiralling food prices.

Such situations were loaded with grave economic and social implications. First, producers were invariably compelled into working their lands under a state of persistent uncertainty. According to Philip Francis:

The proportionate value of lands fluctuates in all countries according to the industry or ability of the owners. In this country [Bengal] more particularly it depends on accidents of drought, inundation or favourable season, of which no general calculation can be made<sup>206</sup>.

Second, such conditions forced lands under cultivation

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<sup>204</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/45, 16 November 1791.

<sup>205</sup> These lands were so denoted "owing both to the quality and their relative situation ..., in regard to rivers, to the facility of obtaining water when wanted for its cultivation & at other times of preventing inundation" [BRC, IOR P/53/8, 15 November 1793].

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., P/49/65, 5 November 1776.

to fluctuate sharply from season to season, "both in extent and quality"<sup>207</sup>. This meant that there was a constant movement from the more productive lands to relatively marginal lands with each cycle of uncertain weather, or there was a large scale lateral shift of an entire village to seek out lands which were relatively better placed: "a village in Bengal", noted Buchanan, "is removed 4 or 5 miles with very little inconvenience indeed" at the slightest sign of adverse weather, "such as an inconvenient shower"<sup>208</sup>. In Rangamati, where the Brahmaputra forced cultivated lands to fluctuate every year, the cultivators had no choice but to "fix on any unoccupied land whenever they may be injured or destroyed by the periodical inundations", which meant that they, and the landed-proprietors, "cannot depend upon sure income from particular places"<sup>209</sup>.

But such shifts did not necessarily provide relief. Apart from the physical inconvenience of leaving behind their settlements, movements of this sort succeeded in placing the cultivators in a number of difficulties. The land which they previously cultivated was laid waste (*pateet*), and they had to start afresh on other lands which placed additional pressures on their already meager resources. In these new lands the migrants were given access to *pateet* lands of varying productivity<sup>210</sup>, usually on concessional terms of revenue; but there was very little done in the way of reducing the financial burden of bringing such lands into cultivation as reclamation was "attended with

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<sup>207</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/22, 23 July 1788.

<sup>208</sup> "Ronggoppur", IOL.Ms.Eur.D.74, f.110. This statement additionally suggests the insufficiency of resources in the hands of the peasants.

<sup>209</sup> BRP, IOR P/72/30, 13 May 1794.

<sup>210</sup> This was in keeping with the strategies framed by *zamindars* to improve the state of cultivation in their lands. See chapter 3.

great expence and more labour"<sup>211</sup>. They were therefore placed in the unenviable position of having to incur debts from the landed-proprietor or from the grain merchant. Quite often the *zamindars* or merchants provided these people with the initial costs, but these were once again loaded with high interest rates.

A dearth therefore was an intense short-term crisis of subsistence and production, but the fact that they recurred periodically in Bengal meant that these short-run crises tended to fuse into one another. The natural rhythms of agriculture were disrupted, so were the economic foundations of agricultural production. Such instances placed crippling burdens on the cultivators thereby making them physically and economically dependent on other sections of agrarian society.

The famine of 1788 was another major catastrophe. Though not as intense as the famine of 1769/70, it nevertheless had disastrous consequences on the peasant-economy. The flood and the cyclone took an immediate toll of lives as people drowned. The flood also killed large quantities of cattle. In its immediate aftermath therefore there was a steep rise in the price of draught animals which meant that the cultivators were unable to plough their lands<sup>212</sup>. The damage done to the established arable

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<sup>211</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/25, 1 February 1788. Peasants were mainly required to cultivate waste lands in these areas. These lands were variously called *porroah* or *mahsulat pateet*, which denoted previously cultivated, but currently waste, lands. These were relatively easier to reclaim. They were also given portions of *shikast pateet* or *khas pateet* which had never been cultivated previously and as such had to be cleared, ploughed and prepared for cultivation [CCR, IOR P/68/5, 21 September 1780, BRC, IOR P/51/25, 3 December 1788]. Obviously it was cultivating the latter which caused the most severe strains on peasant resources.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.; also BRP, IOR P/70/40, 25 April 1788. The toll on the lives of draught animals was another major difference between the devastation caused by floods and droughts. During droughts, when crops withered, the parched grain stalks became a major source for the survival of  
(continued...)

was also enormous. Thus in Jessore:

The effects of these calamities are not confined to any one present injury. They prevented the cultivation of those lands on which the late or dry crops are produced as the Ryotts were *obliged to sow them on lands infinitely less productive* than those they had usually sown them on, which were either covered with water, or so wet as to be unfit for use. That ground on which Cullye [lentils] is grown was lost... . Some crops approaching to ripeness, as til [oil-seed], kudgoor [dates], the first crop of cotton & ca., others in a less forward state, as mustard, barley, tobacco, peas of several kinds, and in some places the seed only sown [were] entirely destroyed<sup>213</sup>.

Even those districts which had not suffered from the cyclone, but had been extensively ravaged by floods, the scale of agricultural devastation was vast. Thus Purnea, still reeling from the famine of 1769/70<sup>214</sup>, was severely flooded in 1787 when even its colla (high) lands were submerged. The district of 24-Parganas was also disastrously affected by a combination of a flood and a small-pox epidemic. In both districts therefore there were sharp reductions of lands under cultivation, high food prices,

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<sup>212</sup>(...continued)

these animals as they were let into these fields to graze [see, for instance, SCC, IOR P/A/10 proceedings of April 1770, and BRC, IOR P/49/47, 30 August 1774]. During a massive flood even this meager basis of sustenance was cut-off for these animals. Consequently cattle-mortality was higher in a flood.

<sup>213</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/22, 23 July 1788; emphasis added.

<sup>214</sup> In 1783 Purnea was still suffering from the consequences of 1769/70 whereby there was "a deficiency in the population and that above one half the lands [were] lying waste merely from the want of ryotts to cultivate them" (BRC, IOR P/50/46, 10 June 1783).



agricultural disruption, desertion and mortality<sup>215</sup>.

The additional problem during the famine of 1788 was the inability of the peasants to revert to the *jala* or *char* lands. The *jala* lands were totally submerged, and the soil so waterlogged was difficult to drain<sup>216</sup>. The *char* lands were similarly rendered uncultivable. Thus in eastern Bengal:

The lands in the churs [*chars*] are in a great measure overgrown with reeds and canes, and the small quantity that is sown, the Ryets cannot take care of from the dread of Tygers, Buffaloes, Hogs & ca. that swarm in the surrounding jungles<sup>217</sup>.

It is nevertheless significant that even amidst such difficult circumstances the peasants tried to salvage a crop of rice at the slightest available opportunity. In Rangpur, there was a patch of fine weather for a fortnight before the cyclone of November 1787 when "the waters had in great measure subsided and the Ryotts in all quarters were diligently employed in the important business of transplanting rice". The cultivators of Rajshahi were similarly engaged in trying to retrieve a rice harvest when the cyclone struck, leading to fresh floods which totally crippled all potential of a self-induced recovery<sup>218</sup>. The surviving population was reduced to states of abject debilitation, both physical and material. Thus in Dhaka:

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<sup>215</sup> See for Purnea, BRP, IOR P/70/18, 31 August 1786 and BRC, IOR P/51/17, 19 March 1788; for 24-Parganas, BRC, IOR P/52/14, 7 July 1790.

<sup>216</sup> "Remarks on the Several Collectorships in the Years 1788 and 1789", IOR, Home Misc., vol. 385, p. 68.

<sup>217</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/29, 22 December 1788.

<sup>218</sup> See BRC, IOR P/51/12, 20 September 1787 and Ibid., P/51/13, 20 November 1787 for Rangpur; Ibid., P/51/29, 22 December 1788 for Jessore.

Those who remain have no cattle to plough their ground, and are much reduced in point of bodily strength that their end is fast approaching, and those with whom a little of the necessaries of life are left are from their distressed situation altogether unable to cultivate their former possessions; in consequence of which the lands cultivated for the last two years remain fallow<sup>219</sup>

The circumstances leading to peasant immiserization, shaped over the preceding years, were strengthened by the famine of 1788. Desperate for subsistence, the cultivators were forced to part with their "implements of tillage", eat into their seed-stocks, if any, and even to sell their children<sup>220</sup> as a last-ditch attempt to survive in a situation so heavily biased against them, as the following description shows:

To procure cattle, seed and the requisite implements of cultivation, and at the same time subsist with their families till the reward of their labours be reaped, is attended with more difficulty than most of the husbandmen are able to accomplish<sup>221</sup>.

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<sup>219</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/29, 22 December 1788.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., P/51/51, 9 December 1789; IOR, Home Misc., vol. 393, pp. 113-14, 120.

<sup>221</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/51, 9 December 1789.

## Chapter 6

### **Agrarian Economy: Local Trade in Agricultural Produce, Merchants and Agricultural Production**

Some of the key elements in maintaining the rhythm of economic life are the manner, channels and agencies for the distribution of food. Taken together, these elements comprise the structure of local trade in agricultural produce. Apart from its importance for the physical survival of people, the question of trade in agricultural produce is crucial in comprehending wider issues pertaining to the structure and organization of internal markets<sup>1</sup>, the modes, methods and formation of mercantile activity, and the relationships between the merchants and the producers. These separate questions when combined together enable us to construct a picture of commercialization of an economy in a specific historical context.

The discussion in chapters 1 and 2 showed that the principal factors influencing the flow of trade were (a) the rising demand for food in the province (b) favourable rural-urban price differentials (c) the creation of a provincially integrated market for food and (d) a cluster of famine and dearth years which not only provided large mercantile profits, despite the climate of uncertainty they created, but also enabled merchants to establish a number

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<sup>1</sup> This question is particularly important in the context of eighteenth century Bengal because the writing of economic history has hitherto been overwhelmingly concerned with Bengal's relations with the world market, or with the marketing structures and strategies for the high-profile commodities like textiles, opium and indigo.

of devices to control the entire range of local trade in food-grains including the primary producer. This chapter therefore seeks to examine the dynamics of mercantile behaviour in the domain of local trade in agricultural produce, especially that in rice or paddy, and to analyze the mechanisms by which merchants translated their control over trade in to an overt domination over agricultural production and the peasantry.

### Commercial profile of local marketing networks

One aspect, crucial to the movement of local trade in Bengal was that many of the local marketing systems (*hat*, *bazaar* and *ganj*) had become specialized agencies for the circulation of food and other items of immediate consumption. As already indicated, Bhagwangola, the main centre feeding Murshidabad handled about 18 million maunds of rice per year in the 1760s. Large markets (*ganjs*) in Calcutta, like Baitakhana and Sovabazar, derived their tax revenue chiefly from the rice and paddy brought there for sale<sup>2</sup>. Similar patterns can be seen even in those areas where large towns did not exist. Purnea's annual trade in grain was worth 2 million maunds; single *parganas* in Dhaka circulated about 1.8 million maunds of paddy and rice a year; and individual *hats* (village markets) in Bakarganj handled on an average 350,000 maunds of rice and 120,000 maunds of paddy a year<sup>3</sup>.

Estimates of the share realized by agricultural produce in the total amount of local trade are few, but those available (figure 1) for rice and paddy do strongly suggest that these shares were remarkably high.

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<sup>2</sup> CCR, IOR P/68/8, 3 September 1781.

<sup>3</sup> Datta, 1986: 385.

Figure 1<sup>4</sup>

<u>Year</u>	<u>District</u>	<u>Trade in grain (% of total)</u>
1771	Jalalpur	56.22
1779	Pagladanga <sup>5</sup>	62.37
<i>circa</i> 1807	Dinajpur	67.9
<i>circa</i> 1807	Rangpur	49.64

Commercial dealings in these markets seem to have been quite buoyant in the period between 1760 and 1800, both in terms of the frequency of transactions and in terms of the social participation in them. In Jessore "every pergunnah and village have established Bazaars and hauts. Several of the villagers keep shops in them, while others hold them at their houses"<sup>6</sup>. The *moodies* (grocers) of Calcutta traded in *bazaars* and from their own houses, while the *tahbazaris*<sup>7</sup> went to markets during the day "exposed their goods on stalls, or in temporary shops *outside* the established market" and returned home at night, only to arrive the next day "with no other intention than to vend their articles which are usually of a perishable nature and must be sold within the day..."<sup>8</sup>. In Dhaka, the *hats* assembled twice or

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.; IOR, CCR P/67/76, 12 March 1779; M. Martin, 1976, vol. 3: Appendix F; Francis Buchanan "Ronggoppur", IOL, Ms. Eur. G. 11, table 38.

<sup>5</sup> This was a market in close proximity to Calcutta and handled the grain arriving from 24-Parganas, a district situated to the south of that city.

<sup>6</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/25, 28 May 1790.

<sup>7</sup> Literally below the market: a name given to the itinerant petty-pedlars in the *bazaars*.

<sup>8</sup> CCR, IOR P/67/72, 16 September 1778; emphasis added.

thrice a week, those in the city were open daily, and the main items of trade consisted of "agricultural produce and of native manufactures"<sup>9</sup>. Even in areas prone to repeated floods, such as the low-lying areas of Rajshahi, markets were held "for four & sometimes in some places for six months of the year *on board of boats*"<sup>10</sup>.

These markets catered for a variety of local needs both of commodities and services. A purely rural market supplying a few villages (*tarf*) of Rangamati (with a total of 256 houses in 1776) had 13 shops which included 4 grocers, 1 tobacconist, 3 dealers in cowries and 2 money-changers (*sarrafs*)<sup>11</sup>. A market established in early 1778, about "760 cubits away" from the big Sovabazar of Calcutta, had, by 1779, 54 shops comprising 39 *tahbazaris*, 9 *moodies*, 3 fish mongers and 3 sellers of "threads and blankets"<sup>12</sup>. A *bazaar* in Sutanuti (established in 1777), had by December 1778 managed to attract a sizeable number of 101 permanent shops and 731 *tahbazaris* vending their goods in the open<sup>13</sup>; 6 new shops were added to this market in 1779, of which one was that of a *sarraf*<sup>14</sup>.

The apparent vibrancy in these markets can be explained partly by the exercise of the Company's political will in freeing the markets from the traditional social control of the landholders and partly by the significance of town demand. The *hats* of Jessore, for instance, seem to have proliferated in the 1780s, precisely at a time when its estuarine marshes were being reclaimed; and these

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<sup>9</sup> Taylor, 1840: 294.

<sup>10</sup> BR Misc., IOR P/89/36, 29 September 1790; emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> WBSA, PCR Murshidabad, vol. 8, 15 February 1776.

<sup>12</sup> CCR, IOR P/67/65, 24 January 1779.

<sup>13</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/13, 22 December 1778.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., P/50/18, 27 July 1779.

markets functioned as a chain of feeder lines between the Sunderbans and Calcutta, along with Katwa and Kalna which formed the three consumption and redistribution centres in western Bengal<sup>15</sup>. But equal emphasis must also be given to the place occupied by rural demand in this situation. It is perhaps significant that Tippera, commonly recognized as having one of the most inhospitable terrains in its hilly parts, had "upwards of 300 hauts" in 1790<sup>16</sup>, and Sylhet had "no fewer than six hundred gunges and bazars" in the same year<sup>17</sup>. The flood prone area of Contai had *hats* where, apart from the usual trade in agricultural produce, "small quantities of thread, coarse weaving cloth, mats made of split bamboos, brass and tutenag plates, koddalies [spades], ploughs, plough shares and ruts for winding thread" were sold at regular intervals<sup>18</sup>. In Rajshahi, as I have already mentioned, *hats* took to boats during peaks of monsoon flooding. These examples indicate a widely pervasive structure of rural demand. It is no accident therefore, that the grain *byaparis* based in towns would often be found sending their surplus stocks, ostensibly kept to meet town demand, back into the countryside at the slightest available opportunity.

#### A social profile of the eighteenth century *byapari*

Trade in agricultural produce was the task of a specialized community of merchants at all levels of the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., P/51/7, 26 February 1788.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., P/52/19, 7 September 1790.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., P/52/13, 8 May 1790.

<sup>18</sup> BR Misc., P/89/41, 15 April 1794.

tiered markets in Bengal<sup>19</sup>. At the *ganjs* and *bazaars* there existed the "principal" or "capital" merchant, variously called the *goldar* (*golahdar* or owner of granaries), *aratadar* (wholesaler) and the *bhusi mahajan* (wealthy in grain) depending on the colloquialisms of different areas<sup>20</sup>. Below them existed a wide range of petty traders who usually traded with their stocks, but also functioned as part of an extensive network of commercial dealings created by the town based merchants. The *farias* (pedlars) of Bakarganj<sup>21</sup> and the *paikar* and *baladiya* of Purnea<sup>22</sup> are examples of such lower groups of traders who, while functioning independently at one level also combined the role of middlemen for some other, and obviously bigger, merchant. This would make the structure of local trading networks more of a multiform set of exchange relationships between a number of differentiated partners rather than a "pyramidal structure" with an easily identifiable base and apex<sup>23</sup>. Multifarious relations of exchange would explain the function of the itinerant traders, like the ones in Birbhum who were merchants "not residing but trading in the zillah [district] *through agents in grain*" in 1796<sup>24</sup>. Such relationships would also explain the existence of *bara byaparis* of Rangpur who came on boats "partly loaded with salt and other commodities and partly with cash" and made their purchases of "grain, tobacco, oil and sugar", which

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<sup>19</sup> I have examined the constraints facing peasants, even the richer ones, as merchants in greater detail in Datta, 1989.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the hierarchy of markets and merchants in neighbouring Bihar, see Kumkum Banerjee, 1986.

<sup>21</sup> Beveridge, 1876: 282.

<sup>22</sup> WBSA, Grain vol.1, 17 October 1794; also Buchanan-Hamilton, 1928: 695-66.

<sup>23</sup> Banerjee (1986: 410) views local trade as a pyramidal structure.

<sup>24</sup> WBDR, n.s.: Birbhum, p. 64.



were in turn sold to other merchants trading in the bigger centres<sup>25</sup>. In Dinajpur, the principal grain *byaparis* were stationed in Rajnagar (the main grain mart of the district) and traded through a wide range of commissioned agents (*gomasthas*) who made spot purchases and then transported the grain to Rajnagar for onward distribution<sup>26</sup>.

Such mercantile linkages also gave rise to various circuits of exchange between a whole set of merchants depending upon the nature of an individual's operations. In Jessore, for instance, *golahdars* sold to *bhashaneah* (river based) traders, who in turn dealt with petty retailers making spot purchases, but these retailers would often make spot purchases directly from the *golahdars* as well from the "occasional vendors in the Bazaars"<sup>27</sup>. We also come across a whole range of shopkeepers (*dokandars*) of Birbhum who were "all retailers of grain" and dealt with the wholesale merchant who resided in the *zillah* and the itinerant trader who was usually non-resident<sup>28</sup>. Then there were the *tahbazaris* who, as in Calcutta, traded in open spaces outside an established *bazaar* mostly in items of immediate consumption. In Rangpur, Buchanan provides evidence for the existence of 17 specialized retailing outlets ranging from the grocer (*moody*) to the dealer in unbleached cloths (*kaporiya*)<sup>29</sup>. The existence and the apparent proliferation of such trading networks perhaps indicate the speed with which the circuits of exchange were completed in the local markets.

Who were the traders in agricultural produce? Data for reconstructing the social profile of the entire range of

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<sup>25</sup> Buchanan, "Ronggoppur". IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, f. 85.

<sup>26</sup> WBSA, Board of Revenue, Judicial Branch, 2 June to 30 August 1790, 14 July 1790; WBSA, Grain, vol. 1, 15 October 1794.

<sup>27</sup> BR Misc., IOR P/89/40, 20 January 1795.

<sup>28</sup> WBDP, n.s., Birbhum, 4 June 1796, p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, ff. 83-84.

merchants in this sector are scarce. There is some evidence, however, for analyzing the social origins of the "principal" traders in the following tentative fashion. Buchanan lists merchants from Benares, presumably of the *Khatris* caste, and Gosains of north India as the richest merchants in Rangpur at the turn of the century<sup>30</sup>. In Dinajpur, the principal trader was the family-based concern of Bhoj Raj, an Oswal merchant from Rajasthan<sup>31</sup>. The longest single piece of evidence so far available of these merchants comes from the letters of R.P.Pott, the Comptroller of government customs at Murshidabad, who (in 1787) described "the whole body of grain beparis" in Murshidabad as being composed of "four tribes", these being "*coyer, buccali, ouzineah and moorchak*"<sup>32</sup>.

D.H.Curly makes an orthographical study of these names and then suggests that *coyer* (*kaya*) refers to the merchants from Rajasthan, *buccali* (*baqqali*) points to a traditional group of grain merchants common in all parts of north India, *ouzoneah* (*ujjaini*) alludes to merchants native to Ujjain and *moorchak* (*murcha*) was the name of a merchant group trading with Murshidabad on the Jalangi river. Curly further suggests that these names do not refer to specific caste groups but rather to a set of regional identities and occupational positions; and that the *kaya* and *baqqal* probably represent a split between the Marwari and Bengali merchants<sup>33</sup>. A list of merchants trading in Rangpur in 1770 shows a dominance of the *banias* or *baniks* (*saha, pal, seth*

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., f.87.

<sup>31</sup> Martin, 1976, vo.2: 759.

<sup>32</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/35, 27 September 1787, letter dated 19 November 1787; emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> "Rulers and Merchants in Late Eighteenth Century Bengal", unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Chicago, 1980, pp.24-25.

and *poddar*)<sup>34</sup>, while similar caste-names (*pal*, *saha*, *sheel* and *addi*) figure prominently among the principal grain traders in Calcutta's Sovabazar in 1787<sup>35</sup>. Of a total of 45,835 maunds of grain allegedly withheld from the markets of Midnapur during the famine of 1788, grain *mahajans*, or *baniks* figure prominently as responsible for controlling 37,710 maunds; the rest, 8,125 maunds, was held back by the *zamindars* and *chaudhuris*<sup>36</sup>.

The overall weight of the evidence does suggest that wholesale trading in food-stuffs was the function of a specialized social community, the *banik* or *bania*<sup>37</sup>, and it is quite likely that it was in a process of transition from previously occupational groups into a distinct social caste in the eighteenth century. H.Sanyal's study of the *Sodgops* (an agricultural caste in south-west Bengal) and the *Tilis* (oil-pressers) documents the social movement of groups from occupational categories to specific castes or sub-castes in agrarian society from the seventeenth century<sup>38</sup>. His study perhaps lends credibility to the view I propose of the grain merchants coalescing into a specific caste during the period under review.

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<sup>34</sup> vide, Mohsin, 1973: 24-25.

<sup>35</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/40, 18 April 1787.

<sup>36</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/21, 2 July 1788.

<sup>37</sup> "Dealers in the necessities of life are of the same cast or tribe and connected with each other", and this was seen as an important reason for enabling "them to form combinations against the public with greater facility than in other countries" [BRC, IOR P/52/26, 21 October 1791].

<sup>38</sup> H.Sanyal, 1981.

Mercantile strategies: creation of trading intermediaries and circumventing state control

Crucial to the principal traders were the links they could establish between their trading headquarters and the supply bases, and the manner in which they did so is of central importance to the ways in which they exercised their control over markets. In essence what the merchants did was to establish a chain of intermediate dealing agents, the *gomastha* and the *paikar*. They traded with loaned capital for a commission, buying up from the *hats* as well as directly from the peasants<sup>39</sup>. The reason why these agents had easier access to the peasants' threshing floor was due to their ownership of pack oxen which facilitated their movements in the *muffassal*<sup>40</sup>. These agents were also instrumental in forwarding seed advances to the needy *raiya*t on behalf of the superior trader<sup>41</sup>.

*Gomasthas* and *paikars* either purchased directly from the cultivators, and these purchases were made both at the latter's house and at the *hat*<sup>42</sup>. The *paikars* took small advances from the non-resident merchant (in Purnea these

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<sup>39</sup> See WBSA, Grain, vol.1, 17 October 1794 for Burdwan; 18 October 1794 for Jessore; 10 October 1794 for Bakarganj; 15 October 1794 for Dinajpur; 17 October 1794 for Purnea; 10 November 1794 for Tippera.

<sup>40</sup> Kumkum Banerjee (1986: 408), following Buchanan-Hamilton, says that the *paikars* of Purnea did not use oxen, considered sacred beasts, as they were men of pure birth. Evidence to the contrary is however available. The *paikars* of Purnea "from keeping a number of cattle are enabled to go some distance into the country and purchase the grain immediately as it is harvested from the cultivator..." says a report from the collector of Purnea in October 1794 (WBSA, Grain, vol.1, 17 October 1794; emphasis added).

<sup>41</sup> Datta, 1986: 396-97, 399.

<sup>42</sup> Beveridge, 1876: 282; BDR, Dinajpur, vol.2, 3 June 1788, p.231.

advances ranged from anything between 1 rupee and 30 rupees at a time)<sup>43</sup>, gave "ample security for the money" and made their purchases "at a rate sufficiently moderate to admit of the pykars selling of it at the gunge price without loss to himself"<sup>44</sup>. The *kaya* and *baqqali* merchants of Murshidabad had their kinsmen stationed in the principal markets of Dinajpur<sup>45</sup>; so did the non-resident merchants purchasing their grain in Rangpur<sup>46</sup> and in Birbhum<sup>47</sup>. But the networks did not stop at this. Big traders also entered into ties with other social groups not belonging to the same caste or kin. The *baladiyas* considered to be of a lower caste were the *paikars* of the grain merchants of Rangpur<sup>48</sup> and Purnea<sup>49</sup>.

The establishment of these trading intermediaries represents the growth of an interlinked capital in Bengal's countryside, a type of capital whose main concentration was in towns, and which by a process of internal division became fragmented into numerous clusters. Yet in essence these clusters were only the other face of a centralized deployment of capital. That the management of capital was centralized is apparent from the way in which these different merchants functioned. The Murshidabad-based merchants, divided as they were into four major groups, managed their affairs under the leadership of a head who was appointed by the group. Each "tribe", writes comptroller Pott, "has a head who manages the business in

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<sup>43</sup> WBSA, Grain, vol.1, 17 October 1794.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> WBSA, Board of Revenue: Judicial Branch, 2 June-30 August 1790, 14 July 1790.

<sup>46</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, f. 84.

<sup>47</sup> WBDR, n.s., Birbhum, p. 64.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., f. 88.

<sup>49</sup> Buchanan-Hamilton, 1928: 528.

Murshidabad for the *collective body*"<sup>50</sup>. What these so-called "tribes" did was to form tightly knit groups (*dala*) under the leadership of a *paramanik* or *dalapati* (the "head" in Pott's language) who regulated the activities of its members spread out over an extensive catchment area. The Dinajpur merchants did so by having regular meetings (*baithak*) with their *dalapati* in Murshidabad where they formulated general principles and regulations in mutual consultation<sup>51</sup>. The importance of their trading concerns meant that restrictions on commercial and social dealings on the basis of caste could not be rigidly enforced. Other castes had to be incorporated in the wider network of the *dala*; even those considered low in the caste hierarchy were brought into its ambit as, for example, the *baladiyas* of Purnea and the *sahu* or *teli* merchants in Rangpur<sup>52</sup>.

All these factors resulted in a honeycomb of intermediate agents who were crucial to the control these merchants could exercise over markets. Close control over supply lines from the *muffassal* and an overriding profit motive were two inter-related considerations for any trader and these intermediaries were one way in which such aspirations could be realized.

Another crucial factor in merchant operations was the manipulation of agricultural prices. The price mechanism comprised two elements: the prices in the rurban centres or in towns and the prices in the countryside<sup>53</sup>. The latter sphere determined what the merchants considered their price of procurement. The other aspect of the price situation (to which I have already drawn attention) was its apparently

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<sup>50</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/35, 27 November 1787; emphasis added.

<sup>51</sup> Martin, 1976, vol. 2: 758; also D.H. Curly, op.cit.

<sup>52</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, f. 84.

<sup>53</sup> "In distant parganas, far removed from proper means of transport and market towns, grain sells considerably cheaper, the price rising in places more contiguous to marts of grain" (WBSA, Grain, vol. 1, 31 October 1794).

volatile instability, even during relatively normal agricultural years. Famines, or near-famines, and harvest failures exerted further destabilizing effects on prices.

To circumvent the problem of oscillating prices and to ensure remunerative returns at both ends of the trading scale were some of the principal concerns of these merchants. Any interference in this sphere was viewed with immediate hostility which even the Company realized much to its chagrin, especially during times of scarcity. Thus in August 1774, when an "unusual drought" was looming large and prices had risen to "an alarming height" in the city of Murshidabad, boats loaded with rice at Bhagwangola would not proceed to the city as the *byaparis* "were in hopes that the price would still rise, particularly if the unfavourable weather should continue..."<sup>54</sup>. During the widespread flood-induced famine of 1787, merchants continued to send rice to Calcutta from the already deficient places like Sylhet, Dinajpur, Dhaka and Rajshahi: "the famine has already raised the price of rice considerably and the merchants continue daily increasing it by exportation"<sup>55</sup>. An attempt was made to place an embargo on exports from Rangpur by the collector D. H. MacDowall, but the *byaparis* continued sending their stocks to Murshidabad, to be re-routed to Calcutta, saying that "we have never sold grain at Rungpore, and from selling here great loss will accrue to us..."<sup>56</sup>. In fact even Warren Hastings was forced to deregulate prices and suspend *ganj* duties to coax merchants to bring rice to Calcutta in 1784 (a year of a partial famine) as "they were deter'd from bringing it to market because they were obliged to sell it

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<sup>54</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/51, 13 February 1775.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. and 9 August 1787.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., P/51/9, 21 July 1787.

at an arbitrary valuation"<sup>57</sup>.

Governmental efforts to meet this problem head-on met with less success than had been anticipated. They simply could not break through the mercantile web and deal directly with the cultivators. Merchants bought all the surplus grain available at the slightest suspicion of state interference. "The mahajans having by some means obtained information of Government's intention are endeavouring to purchase up all the grain of the country in the expectation of making their own terms" wrote the collector of Tirhut in February 1795<sup>58</sup>. In Sylhet attempts to keep the state's involvement in the purchases of grain under wraps failed in October 1794 as "the rice merchants forming an idea that the government are in want of grain store it up to enhance the price and thereby distress the District"<sup>59</sup>. State buying in Purnea was similarly troubled. The collector there wrote in dismay that his attempts to purchase 10,000 maunds had increased the spot price of rice "by one-fourth the next market day", whereas fifty merchants could purchase 20,000 maunds in one day "*without any enhancement of price*"<sup>60</sup>.

This covert resistance by the grain merchants made the Company reverse its policy, initiated in 1794, to buy directly from the producers at regulated prices and to stockpile in "public granaries"<sup>61</sup>. This resistance forced them to make purchases "by private arrangements with grain merchants and other persons in such manner as may appear

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<sup>57</sup> "Abstract of an Examination of Several Grain merchants in Calcutta", Sir John Shore to Council, 1 February 1788, in Ibid., P/51/7.

<sup>58</sup> WBSA, Grain, vol.3, 14 February 1795.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., vol.1, 19 October 1794.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 31 October 1794; emphasis added.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.2.



best calculated to procure grain at the cheapest rate"<sup>62</sup>, even though it was universally known that the "mohajons always sell at a higher price than what can be purchased from the ryotts"<sup>63</sup>.

#### Merchants, price control and profits

Having circumscribed the interference of the state in agricultural prices the merchants set about determining these themselves. It was commonly accepted that the sale prices in towns and *ganjs* were determined by the merchants themselves<sup>64</sup>, presumably in their sessional *baithaks*. The merchants of Calcutta who purchased grain from the ones trading from Murshidabad and Dhaka frequently complained that coming to agreeable sale prices between these groups was difficult because of the interference of the Company in Calcutta's *bazaars*; their logic clearly being that prices had to be negotiated between the traders themselves, and that the merchants would trade wherever they received a better price: "more will be brought to the market if the merchants are permitted to sell [at] what price they please" said the *byaparis* of Calcutta to John Shore in February 1788<sup>65</sup>.

Apart from manipulating prices during times of scarcity (discussed below), these merchants also took advantage of the seasonal flow of the principal riverain

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.147.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 29 October 1794.

<sup>64</sup> BRC, IOR P/50/30, 5 January 1781; BRP, IOR P/70/40, 1 April 1788; *ibid.*, P/70/44, 20 August 1788; Taylor, 1840: 296.

<sup>65</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/17, 1 February 1788.

systems upon which the larger towns depended on their supplies of food from long distances. The following description pertaining to the supplies of food to Calcutta in 1791 is extremely revealing.

The times when rice becomes most scarce and dear are in a month or two after the communication between the Great River [i.e the Ganges] by means of the Gellingee, Cossembuzar and Sooty Rivers, with the river Hoogly are stopt [sic], and become unnavigable, even for small craft, which usually happens by the end of November, or early in December, and continues to the end of May, or beginning of June, when these channels of conveyance again are opened, and become navigable; from which it appears that all communication with the upper provinces, and the importation of grain from the these parts are shut up, for about six months in a year. This therefore is the season when rice usually becomes dear, not because a real dearth or scarcity reigns, but that here in Calcutta, and the province of Bengal, *the corn-merchants in wholesale and retail raise the price of their grain; and this they always do from December to June when the communication with the upper country is open again*<sup>66</sup>.

It was precisely the determination of "the price they please" which made the merchants hostile to state intervention, as I have just shown. At another level it caused them to chart out numerous strategies in order to control prices and supplies as well as to ride the numerous price crests and troughs. These strategies were designed to control the source of all trade: the peasant. One such agency was the chain of intermediaries who made spot purchases from the *raiya*t's houses as well from the *hats*. This was complemented by the ownership of storehouses

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<sup>66</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/28, 1 March 1791; emphasis added.

(*golahs*) at various places capable of storing up to 5000 maunds of rice or paddy for more than five years without damage, and by the possession of those crucial modes of transportation which the *raiya*t lacked<sup>67</sup>.

The *gomastha* and *paikar* both purchased whatever surplus was available and forestalled competition, thus enabling particular merchants to emerge as *preemptive* buyers in their own trading regions. The *golahs* enabled the merchants to tide over seasonal variations in agricultural prices between the time of ploughing and sowing (when prices were at their highest and grain was sold or advanced as seed loans) and harvests (when prices ebbed and grain was purchased). These *golahs* also enabled them to even out any disadvantages which may otherwise have arisen from unseasonal price oscillations created by an intermixture of good and bad agricultural years. In good years when grain prices dropped sharply, the merchants would buy up, store in their *golahs* and release in *both directions* (town and country) in bad years brought about by crop failures<sup>68</sup>. The *gomasthas* were under strict instructions to cease making spot purchases (usually done immediately after the harvest) if they felt that the prices were not low enough, or that the peasants were bargaining for better terms<sup>69</sup>. The producers faced major problems if this ever materialized as it would immediately jeopardize the payment of revenue to the state in cash since "without the assistance of the merchants, the ryotts suffer the greatest distress to liquidate the demand for rent upon them"<sup>70</sup>. This pressure forced the cultivators to suffer an enforced reduction of price in order to appease the merchant. It is therefore

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<sup>67</sup> Datta, 1986: 400-1.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. 395, 399-400.

<sup>69</sup> WBSA, Grain, vol. 1, 17 October 1794.

<sup>70</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/30, *arzi* of the Raja of Burdwan, 31 July 1790.

hardly surprising that the *raiya*ts were often "*obliged to dispose of their grain on any terms, for one third, often for half less, than the customary market price*"<sup>71</sup>.

Profits from trade seem to have emerged from three levels. At the first level were those profits which accrued from the act of selling in the towns. At the second level we can see those profits which emerged while purchasing grain from peasants, and at the third level were the super profits which merchants made during times of scarcity. The first two levels were ever present in any type of transaction<sup>72</sup>, whereas the third was periodic but immense nevertheless.

Contemporary notions that average rates of profit from selling grain in towns ranged from 15 to 20 percent under normal circumstances<sup>73</sup> may have been a conservative estimate as figure 3 shows:

Figure 3<sup>74</sup>

<u>Year</u>	<u>Sale of rice in</u>	<u>Percent profit</u>
1775	Murshidabad	52.6
1794	Dhaka	42.8
1794	Calcutta	77.7

Trade with the towns was not a profitable venture in

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<sup>71</sup> CCR, IOR P/68/7, 4 May 1781; emphasis added.

<sup>72</sup> In fact the distinction between the first and second levels of profits is largely formal in an effort to show the various channels which contributed to the making of mercantile profit. In actual operation these two levels were intertwined in a complex fashion, and it was level two (profits made from underpricing the peasant) which actually determined the range of profits which could be made in level one.

<sup>73</sup> CPC, vol. 8, letter no. 158, 12 February 1788.

<sup>74</sup> Calculated from Datta, 1986: 389.

grain alone. Betel leaf merchants of Dhaka, who had carved petty monopolies of their own had an extremely lucrative trade going precisely because of the price differentials which prevailed between the town and the *muffassal*: "the difference between the price at which paun [betel-leaf] is sold in the city of Dacca, and the rate at which it is purchased, probably within three miles of the town, is *frequently one thousand percent*" was how the profit from this trade was described by W.Douglas, the collector of Dhaka in October 1789<sup>75</sup>.

Such profits could emerge because of the prevailing modes of procurement which forced the peasant to remain at the lowest rung of the price mechanism prevailing in the countryside<sup>76</sup>, and it was here that we see the second level of profit in operation. The fact that peasants were coerced into selling at prices below a third or even half the "customary market price" perhaps indicates the techniques of pricing strategies adopted by the merchants. In fact the data available (figure 4) show that the extent of underpricing the producer could be higher than half the prevailing market prices at the village level.

Figure 4<sup>77</sup>

<u>Year</u>	<u>Locality</u>	<u>Produce</u>	<u>% profit in procurement</u>
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1777	Burdwan	Rice	88.6
1777	Dinajpur	Rice	66.6
1794	Murshidabad	Paddy	75

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<sup>75</sup> BRC, IOR P/57/50, 24 October 1789; emphasis added.

<sup>76</sup> Also cf. Datta, 1989: 397-98.

<sup>77</sup> Calculated from *ibid.*, p.398.

1794	Murshidabad	Rice	44.4
1794	Purnea	Paddy	33.3

At the third level (during years of scarcity) the merchants made profits ranging from 150 to 200 percent by manipulating the prices between town and country. Famines were boon years for these merchants from another point: these were also the years when villages became gross importers of food and profits ranging from 40 to 20 percent were easily made by sending grain to the *muffassal*<sup>78</sup>, but these were much below the advantages arising from trading with towns during such years<sup>79</sup>.

#### Merchants and food supply during famine and dearth

The discussion in chapter 2 gave rise to two important facts. First, a famine or a dearth, were occasions when the per capita availability of food actually declined. Second, getting supplies by acquiring food from elsewhere, particularly from other provinces, was difficult, if not impossible as a full-scale crisis would never be apparent before late October (i.e. just before the maturation of the *aman* harvest), by which time it was difficult to get food from outside since a "considerable time must elapse before the ships which may happen to be lying in the river [Hughli] unemployed can be fitted out, as the owners ascertain from what countries the rice can be procured at

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp.389-90.

<sup>79</sup> This relative disadvantage would perhaps explain the higher relative mortality in primarily rural areas (like Purnea, for instance) during the famine of 1769-70.

a price which will be worth their while to procure it"<sup>80</sup>. These facts meant that during a famine or a dearth the province had only its internal resources to depend on for food, and this raises the question of the internal movement of food in bulk by the merchants.

When a scarcity struck, it tended to exacerbate the already high demand for food in the towns and *gasbas*; it also forced an immediate upward spiral in rural demand as the producers now became net consumers of grain<sup>81</sup>. The entire range of issues behind the events of 1769-70 leaves a distinct impression that it was an artificial famine. The artificiality of the famine was hinted at by Warren Hastings when he acknowledged the severity of the Company's revenue collections during the famine months. Hastings was to reiterate this theme subsequently (in 1783) when he wrote:

It appears from the enquiries then made, and from the others which were connected with the famine of 1769, that the first want was artificial, proceeding from the *expectation* of a real want, and from the natural inducement which it afforded to the dealers in grain to with hold it from the market in the hopes of *deriving a larger profit from a more distant sale*, and this, with the compulsive means which were used to force the grain into

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<sup>80</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/36, 21 October 1791. Even in the mid-nineteenth century a price rise after the arrival of the winter harvest was fraught with serious implications of a severe scarcity during the next year, but even as late as that period the colonial state had been unable to collect enough evidence "by which to gauge its full and terrible significance" [Hunter, 1869: ix].

<sup>81</sup> This is not to say that under relative normal circumstances they were self-sufficient. Rural artisans invariably had to buy food and the peasants, barring a few with relatively larger resources, had to take recourse to the local *hat* to purchase a number of items of food (like lentils, vegetables, salt) which they needed. Even basic staples were often purchased. Their dependence on the market was intensified during seasons of scarcity.

consumption, and which drove the proprietors into destructive expedients for hoarding and secreting it, [prevailed] as the *principal cause* of the famine which ensued...<sup>82</sup>.

Hastings's analysis is important in so far as it points to the actuality of the famine. It is also crucial because his analysis clearly indicates that the famine in 1769-70 can no longer be interpreted as a food shortage occasioned by "natural" causes alone. His estimation also suggests that the actual misery was caused by an *artificial* failure of supplies, a point which perhaps indicates that supplies of food were available but did not, or were not made to reach those places which needed grain most. There is of course a clear bias in Hastings's analysis and that lies in his propensity to blame the "merchants", obviously the indigenous ones. For reasons which are obvious, Hastings did not stress the fact that the Company's own officials were also alleged to have profiteered during the famine<sup>83</sup>.

Unfortunately not much is known about the activities of the indigenous grain merchants during the famine months. But Hastings's suspicion that they did attempt to profiteer was apparently well-founded. As soon as the drought forced prices to rise abnormally, the merchants started buying up from those districts which still had some surpluses from previous harvests. Merchants from Burdwan and Hughli flooded to Midnapur and apparently carried off "much larger quantities [of grain] than the Country [Midnapur] could afford"<sup>84</sup>. Similarly, the Murshidabad based merchants

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<sup>82</sup> Minute of Warren Hastings to the Council, 20 November 1783, incorporated in consultations of BRC, IOR P/50/68, 8 September 1786, pp. 621-22; emphasis added.

<sup>83</sup> Brit. Mus., Add. Ms., 29076, f. 75 and 29132, ff. 380, 470..

<sup>84</sup> BDR, Midnapur, vol. 4, From E. Baber to C. Russell, 7 March 1771, p. 53.



entered Rangpur, where stocks of food were available and began "exporting the grain extremely fast, and it will all very soon be taken away except what may be purchased to be kept here"<sup>85</sup>. The net result was a rapid increase in the spot price of grain, and such instances were reported from Burdwan<sup>86</sup> and Midnapur<sup>87</sup> in western Bengal; prices were also pushed up in eastern Bengal though not to the same extent as most districts here had relatively larger stocks of food available<sup>88</sup>.

The chief reason for such mercantile strategies was the need to cater to town demand, but the situation in 1769-70 was different in so far as there was a phenomenal rise in food prices in the *countryside*. In fact the available price data suggest a *higher* price of food in the villages than in the towns during the famine months. For instance, while the average price of rice in Midnapur was 1.57 rupees a maund between September and December 1769, in Calcutta rice could be purchased at 1 rupee per maund in 1769<sup>89</sup>. In July 1770, coarse rice in Murshidabad was being sold for 1.14 rupees a maund<sup>90</sup>, but in the villages of Rangpur it was selling at an unheard of price of 3.07 rupees<sup>91</sup>. In November 1770, when the price of rice at Murshidabad was 1.33 rupees a maund, the price at Natore, "situated in the heart of the rice country", was 2.22

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<sup>85</sup> WBSA, LCB, vol.1, 17 August 1770, p.40.

<sup>86</sup> BPC, IOR P/1/44, 20 November 1769; BRC, IOR P/49/42, 7 December 1773.

<sup>87</sup> BDR, Midnapur, vol.4, 7 March 1771.

<sup>88</sup> This fact was noted by the Board of Revenue in their Minute (October 1791) on famines in Bengal, cf. BRC, IOR P/52/36, 21 October 1791, pp.494-518.

<sup>89</sup> W.B. Bayly, 1816: 516.

<sup>90</sup> WBSA, CCR, vol.1, Proceedings of July 1770, p.444.

<sup>91</sup> WBSA, Letter Copy Book of the Resident at the Darbar, vol.1, 7 August 1770.

rupees<sup>92</sup>. The result was a cross-flow of food supplies at very high prices from town to country and from country to town<sup>93</sup>. Therefore the allegation that the merchants *only* hoarded or "secreted" food during the height of the famine does not seem feasible, since an action of that type would go against the very essence of their enterprise of making the maximum profit during times of scarcity.

The role of the East India Company during the famine was apparently unique in the history of the province. In the immediately preceding regime of the *Nizamat*, the state seldom interfered in the arena of grain trade, except during times of scarcity when it sought to regulate prices and prevented merchants from setting up monopolies; the essential idea behind such strategies was to keep supply lines open to towns under threat of scarcity<sup>94</sup>. On the other hand the Company's political role was inextricably linked to its commercial and revenue interests, which meant that political rule was still intermeshed with variety of trading interests: the interests of its own, those of the private traders and those of its officials who traded for themselves under the guise of their "native" agents.

With the first symptoms of the drought being apparent the Company responded by stockpiling to feed its garrisons in Bengal and Bihar "for six months to come"; the thought of relieving "the miserable situation" occasioned by the drought was subsidiary to the needs of revenue and feeding the army<sup>95</sup>. Thus in Chittagong "we have given directions for buying up small quantities of rice for the Calcutta

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<sup>92</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol. 2, 31 December 1770.

<sup>93</sup> See Ibid for rice trade from Murshidabad to the villages of Rajshahi; WBSA, Letter Copy Book, vol. 1, 7 August 1770 for trade in Rangpur between Govindganj, its principal grain mart, and the countryside; also Hunter, [1897: 410] for trade between Calcutta and Nadia during the famine.

<sup>94</sup> See chapter 1.

<sup>95</sup> IOR, Letters Received, E/4/20, 23 November 1769.

market as the new crop comes in, and have employ'd a Gomasthah in the adjacent parts of the country for the same purpose"<sup>96</sup>. As the drought intensified and the demand and prices increased, the officials and private European traders apparently took it upon themselves to profiteer from the situation. They used their "native agents" (*gomasthas*) to purchase grain by force<sup>97</sup> which allegedly went to such an extent that the hapless peasants were coerced into selling "seed requisite for the next harvest"; the rice thus collected was sold at famine prices in the towns of Calcutta and Murshidabad<sup>98</sup>.

Yet the exact amount of the province's food stocks which the Company or its officials actually cornered is unclear. Estimates of rice monopolized by the state alone range from 60,000 maunds<sup>99</sup> to 120,000 maunds<sup>100</sup>. Sinha's estimate appears closer to the real picture because the *dastaks* issued to officials in Bihar and Chittagong during that famine amounted to 57,300 maunds, whereas the total amount of rice actually handled by these officials was 46,000 maunds<sup>101</sup>. The scale of the drought and the entrenched power of indigenous merchants simply did not allow Company officials to corner a major proportion of the market during the famine. Most of Chittagong's grain reserves had already been bought by local merchants before the officials could intervene<sup>102</sup>, and the supplies of

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<sup>96</sup> *BDR, Chittagong*, vol.1, 30 November 1769, p.100.

<sup>97</sup> Anderson Papers, Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 45430, Richard Becher to David Anderson, 3 January 1773, ff.256-57.

<sup>98</sup> Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 29076, f.75 and 29132, f.380.

<sup>99</sup> Sinha, 1968: 57.

<sup>100</sup> B.B.Chaudhury, 1983: 299.

<sup>101</sup> Public Consultations, vol.38 (National Archives of India), pp.315-16, 413, 416. I am grateful to P.J.Marshall for providing me with this information.

<sup>102</sup> BPC, IOR P/1/51, 6 February 1772.

Midnapur were snapped up by merchants from Birbhum and Burdwan leading to a steep escalation in local prices for a short time<sup>103</sup>.

Nevertheless it must also be pointed out that some efforts were made by the state to regulate the amount of exports of food from different districts. In Bihar, Thomas Rumbold ordered the suspension of market duties on the importation of rice to Patna and forbade grain to be "carried out of the province"<sup>104</sup>, and in Chittagong:

Your [the Board's] orders for preventing Monopolys [sic] of Grain & to encourage the planting of such Grain and Pulse as can be produced in the dry season have been published thro'out the Province, and we have satisfaction to advise your Honour & ca. that precautions taken by the Chief [at Chittagong] to prevent the exportation on the first appearance of a scarcity has kept the price here very moderate<sup>105</sup>.

Exports of rice from Calcutta were immediately reduced, partly as a result of insufficient supplies and partly owing to the need to retain available food stocks within the province. The duties collected on exports of rice at Calcutta's custom house fell from 6134.68 rupees in 1769 to 1876.81 rupees in 1770<sup>106</sup>. However, this effort to alleviate a crisis in the distribution of food was inadequate. Chaudhury's explanation that this crisis was caused by the interests of the state, private merchants and the Company officials which put immense pressure on the

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<sup>103</sup> Chapter 2, Figure 11.

<sup>104</sup> SCC, IOR P/A/9, 1 August 1769.

<sup>105</sup> *BDR, Chittagong*, vol. 1, from J. Reed and T. Lane to H. Verelst, 30 November 1769, p. 100-101.

<sup>106</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/52, 16 May 1775.

market with the result that prices soared<sup>107</sup> must appear inadequate in the light of the above facts. One must also bear in mind that local officials were also blamed for malpractices. For instance, Muhammad Reza Khan was said to have:

Entirely ruined the country by every oppressive means and methods that he could think of; for he in the very height of the famine, having stopt [sic] the merchants boats loaded with rice and other provisions, bound for the city of Muxadavad [Murshidabad], forcibly purchased from them rice from 25 to 30 seers per rupee, and did retail it out from 3 to 4 seers per rupee, and all other eatables in proportion; yet for all these execrable acts and deeds, he has been winked at by the superior power, who could have at times controul [sic] and compel him from acting in so inhumane and infamous a manner; and by this means several lacks of people have starved and died, after selling every substance of theirs, to procure eatables, at the exorbitant rates aforesaid<sup>108</sup>

Since Muhammad Reza Khan was later absolved of these charges, this complaint must indicate the hostility of grain merchants to official interference during periods of scarcity. The food-supply situation during the famine of 1769/70 clearly shows that the availability or non-availability of food in particular districts were determined more by the amount of the local harvest actually destroyed by the drought and by the grain merchants whose activities the state could hardly control, than by the profiteering activities of some Company or other officials.

The power of the merchants to determine the flow of food during a subsistence crisis in direct contravention of the state's will is also borne out by their behaviour

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<sup>107</sup> B.B.Chaudhury, 1983: 299.

<sup>108</sup> Letter of Huzurimal to Company, 10 October 1770, Brit.Mus., Add.Ms., 29132, f.380.

during periods of dearth. The chief features of a dearth were a sharp decline in the per capita availability of food at localized levels and a sharp escalation in spot prices but stocks of food were available from the less-stricken areas which meant that the *byapari* could circulate his stocks with greater ease and profit. During the partial drought of 1773 many merchants:

Have set up private gunges for the reception of all rice and paddy brought to the market by themselves and others, and the more effectually to avoid being detected, in what they are conscious to themselves tends to a monopoly, have resisted and turned out from their golahs and landing places the sircars [officials] and kyalls [weighmen] who are employed by the [Company's] Customs House<sup>109</sup>.

Establishing "private gunges" and disposing of the Company's market-officials meant that these merchants tried to avoid paying established duties and they were able to circumvent state authority at the same time. From the Company's point of view, such activities had three major implications: (i) such "importations and sales admit of collusive compacts which greatly enhance the price", (ii) they freed the merchants "from the general and wholesome regulations established in publick markets for the humane purposes of preventing an artificial scarcity", and (iii) such actions prevented "a precise knowledge of the quantity of grain in Town and consequently those timely measures which government upon the apprehension of real scarcity might judge proper to adopt"<sup>110</sup>.

Though the Company worried about the consequences of mercantile strategies during situations of dearth, there was very little which could actually be done to prevent

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<sup>109</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/38, 19 February 1773.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

these consequences. In 1773, these merchants resorted to buying-up of stocks as soon as the first signs of a dearth-panic arose<sup>111</sup>, and the result was a sharp price increase because "they have leagued together to keep it [the price] up and we [the producers] are perishing with hunger"<sup>112</sup>. Once again we find the spectre of hoarding during a food-crisis emerging as the dominant form of merchant behaviour, but this was only a partial explanation of what happened during the drought of 1773. Of greater importance was the steep rise in the urban prices of food caused by the "sudden demand at the several *capital marts*" which caused the merchants to export their stocks in that direction rather than sell in the countryside where prices were relatively less<sup>113</sup>. Thus boat-loads of rice were delayed at Bhagwangola by local merchants in order to make the most from a situation of high food-prices<sup>114</sup>. Temporary stock-retention, rather than outright hoarding seems to have been characteristic of these merchants during bad agricultural years. Thus during the drought of 1775, merchants bringing grain to the city of Murshidabad "have temporarily ordered their boats to be detained in the Jellingee [river] to see if the weather will hold fair [sic] for any time longer"<sup>115</sup>.

Another illustrative example of such strategies comes from the flood of 1784 in eastern Bengal. The flood destroyed the *aus* harvest and severely threatened the *aman*, and a large-scale food-shortage was imminent. The merchants withheld stocks from previous harvests, thereby threatening the inhabitants of Dhaka with the prospect of protracted

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., P/49/42, 2 December 1773.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., P/49/47, 30 August 1774.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., P/49/42, 7 December 1773; emphasis added.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., P/49/51, 13 February 1775.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., P/49.58, 22 December 1775.

starvation<sup>116</sup>. The initial reaction of the Board of Revenue was to clamp down upon such merchants by instructing the collector to give "public notice by beat of Tom Tom, that all Traders in Grain who shall refuse to sell or to bring usual supplies to market shall have their Property in Grain seized by Government, and be liable to such other punishment as the Circumstances of their offence appear to dictate"<sup>117</sup>. This seemingly harsh stricture had no effect upon the merchants. The grain dealers simply refused to sell at dictated prices and the impasse continued till October when the collector was forced to concede: "the dealers were declared to have authority to sell at pleasure" in *bazaars* protected by Sepoys. The results were immediate. Rice stocks appeared once again albeit at high prices because the "general scarcity in the mofussil [countryside] will not allow of its being cheaper"<sup>118</sup>.

Similar tendencies operated during the famine of 1788. In a reply to a questionnaire from John Shore, the principal grain-traders of Calcutta replied that the only way in which merchants all over Bengal could be induced to send supplies to Calcutta and Murshidabad was to free the markets of state control by temporarily suspending "all gunge duties" and by the abolition of all arbitrary valuation in the prices of food. These would, they said, "operate greatly to the relief of the inhabitants by enabling the merchants to furnish them with grain so much cheaper"<sup>119</sup>. The traders could lend weight to their claims because they had already purchased the internal surpluses

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<sup>116</sup> *Bangladesh District Records, Dacca District*, op.cit., 10 July 1784, p.81.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 July 1784, p.83.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 October 1784, pp.97-98.

<sup>119</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/17, 1 February 1788.



of food available<sup>120</sup> and the demand of the cities could only be met if they decided to bring in food<sup>121</sup>. Both these aspects are apparent from the following letter written by Bhoj Raj, the principal grain dealer in Murshidabad, to Nawab Mubarak-ud-daulah describing the state of procurement during that famine:

There are three causes for the increasing price of grain in the city of Moorshedabad. First, the beoparries of Calcutta and Calcutta... have purchased and keep large quantities of rice in the neighbourhood of the Rara [Rarh] region [which is] the name of the districts to the west of Moorshedabad among rice merchants. Second, at Bogwanpoor, where it is known there are 22 Golahs, all the Grain coming from the south [of Bengal] arrives and is sold. This year whatever arrives from the environs and from the south, the Dacca merchants purchase immediately on arrival of the boats and carry it away. It is [therefore] impossible to make any purchases there. Third, what little arrives in the city of Moorshedabad is purchased & carried away by Calcutta merchants.

Under a situation of this kind, it was perhaps not surprising for the state to think that "wholesale & retail have their separate combinations, and have actually created an artificial famine" and caused food prices to rise "to a scandalous degree"<sup>122</sup>.

The problems faced by the state during a famine, or even a dearth, were two: first, to prevent an over-

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., P/51/19, 17 April 1788 and 18 April 1788; *BDR, Dinajpur*, vol. 1, 19 January 1788, p. 89.

<sup>121</sup> 5000 maunds of rice per day were required to feed the population of Calcutta and Murshidabad alone [Ibid., P/51/16, 1 February 1788, and P/51/17, 14 March 1788]. Ibid., P/15/17, 1 February 1788.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., P/51/16, 1 February 1788.

exportation of food from centres possessing some surpluses, and second, to acquire adequate supplies to feed the towns and the military establishment. As we have seen, forcible embargoes on exports simply did not work. D.H. Curly suggests that an embargo on exports of food and regulation of prices were the two components of traditional famine relief policies followed by the Nawabs of Bengal, and that they were reasonably effective since they could replace "free" markets with local systems of autarky and regulated distribution in the short-run to relieve the pressures of a famine<sup>123</sup>. This view does not conform to the actual systems of food-distribution during a famine or dearth<sup>124</sup>. Our evidence shows that merchants constantly sought to maintain conditions of "free" market, and any interference met with immediate retaliation: stocks were deliberately withdrawn from the direction desired by the state. Merchants were not subservient to the will of the state at all times, and neither could the state exercise its power unilaterally over them. Thus during the famine of 1788, the *amlah* of Rajganj, (in Dinajpur) tried:

To keep the markets in and about Dinagepore supplied with a sufficient quantity of grain for the daily consumption of inhabitants, [for which] I have been obliged to have recourse to the Golahs where the grain is hoarded [but] the Proprietors [i.e. the

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<sup>123</sup> "Rulers and Merchants", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, op.cit., pp. 49 ff.

<sup>124</sup> Additionally the entire evidence of price regulations and restrictions on exports provided by Curly pertains to food-shortages after the famine of 1769/70, which he interprets (without explaining why) as a continuation of "traditional" famine-relief policies.

merchants] have persevered in opposing every mild endeavour I have practised to induce them to comply with my entreaties to relieve the scarcity, which in fact is of their own making...<sup>125</sup>.

Food could only be procured by a *negotiated settlement* with the grain-dealers, as was, for instance, done in Malda in 1788. After the initial flexing of state-muscles, the Company was forced to negotiate as the much desired food refused to materialize. Kishan Mangal "a merchant of that place" negotiated a "fair" price on behalf of the other local merchants for the available grain stocks, and:

After [the price] being settled... [it] was paid to the dealers who then went away apparently satisfied. The only end purpose was to prevent distress to the Country from its being stripped of provision, and *this required none of the violence which they [the merchants] assert to have been done to them [before]*<sup>126</sup>

Food-supplies during years of scarcity were therefore a source of constant friction between the state and the local trading communities. Obviously, the state wanted to take the credit for ensuring supplies but the reality of the situation was different. For instance, Hastings described the state's role during the severe dearth of 1783 in the following words:

Few men doubted that the scarcity proceeded from the failure of the preceding harvest, and the consumption of former years. The members who composed the administration chose to put this conclusion to the test.

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<sup>125</sup> BDR, *Dinajpur*, vol.2, 14 June 1788, p.231.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., vol.1, 19 January 1788, p.89.

After having applied such measures as were most likely to give a temporary check to the complaints, they appointed a Committee, consisting of the Senior and most Intelligent Servants of the Company, whom they invested with ample powers to collect accounts of the actual quantities of rice existing in the provinces; to compell [sic] every proprietor of it to deliver to their agents an exact account of what he possessed; and in the event of want of a due supply in the markets, to contribute to it according to his ability. The threat of confiscation was also proclaimed against any who should attempt to elude the investigation, either by secreting their grain, or by delivering false accounts of it; but if I may trust to my memory, only one instance occurred, in which it was found necessary to inflict that penalty. The result of the measure was that markets were in a short space of time abundantly supplied; the price of grain gradually sank in its level; and from the returns made to the Committee, it appeared that there was a sufficiency to last even a considerable period beyond the next expected harvest<sup>127</sup>.

Hastings's analysis appears an unconvincing apology for the failure of the state to ensure adequate food-supplies during that crisis. Witness for instance, the Bengal government's own admission (in 1788) that:

The most active temporary interference of Government has been found productive of no other consequence than a *slight alteration* of the pressure of famine on the poor class of natives<sup>128</sup>

Later enquiries about the scarcity of 1783 showed that:

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<sup>127</sup> "Copy of a Memorial on the High Prices of Wheat, February, 1800", Brit. Mus., Add. Ms., 29233, ff. 132-132a.

<sup>128</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/22, 15 August 1788; emphasis added.

Mr. Hastings allowed the *price to fix itself*, the merchants having represented to him that they were deter'd from bringing it to market because they were obliged to sell it according to an arbitrary valuation. He also *suspended the Calcutta Gunge Duties*, which were five chuttacks per rupee, and ten seers per hundred maunds...<sup>129</sup>

The mechanisms by which food was made to move from one area to another during a subsistence-crisis does show the organized power of the grain-merchants in the late eighteenth century. The sources of such power were numerous. First, they owned *golahs* and the means of transportation which were crucial not only for acquiring the crucial supplies but for moving them around as well. Second, the grain-merchants were socially cohesive as they came from similar caste groups and therefore followed common occupational strategies. They were additionally organized in tightly knit groups (*dala*). People like Thakurdas Nondi (in Rangpur), Bhoj Raj (in Murshidabad) and Kishan Mangal (in Malda) were situated at the head of an organized network of trading activities, hierarchically arranged and spread over a wide catchment area. This enabled effective trading; it also made it possible for traders to disseminate information and to quickly forestall competition, particularly from the state. Third, and perhaps the most crucial, was the intermeshing of trade with agricultural production. In fact one of the major barriers in the way of acquiring supplies during the famine of 1788 was "the usual and long standing custom of Grain Merchants advancing [money] at the commencement of the season for the crops" which meant that the "Riauts sell what grain they can spare to the merchants *in preference* of bringing it to publick market to be sold at a fixed

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<sup>129</sup> John Shore to Council, Ibid., P/51/17, 1 February 1788.

rate"<sup>130</sup>. The food surpluses of Birbhum were already hypothecated to the merchants of Calcutta and Murshidabad and as a result they were being provided with grain by the peasants during the famine<sup>131</sup>. Such evidence necessitates an analysis of peasant-merchant linkages in agricultural production, and the following section is addressed to this end.

### Merchants and the agrarian economy

The connections between the grain merchants and agricultural production were caused by a combination of factors in the late eighteenth century, the details of which have been examined in chapter 1. Briefly stated, the linkages seem to have arisen out of a buoyant demand for food both in the towns and in the countryside, rising agricultural prices and a recurrence of famines and semi-famine situations which plagued the province from 1769 onwards. These situations made it imperative for the traders to keep a tight control over lines of supply which they did in two ways: (a) by the creation of a wide network of trading intermediaries (*paikar* and *gomastha*) scattered over an extensive catchment area; and (b) by the formulation of strategies designed to control the peasants' freedom of choice in the market. An analysis of the latter strategy provides a picture of mercantile penetration in agricultural production.

There is some evidence to suggest that the grain *byapari* had started getting involved in the process of agricultural reclamation as a device to ensure steady supplies in the long-run. Data of merchants providing

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., vol.2, 14 June 1788, p.231; emphasis added.

<sup>131</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/19, 17 April 1788.

advances of money, through their agents, to cultivators wanting to reclaim wastes are available from the district of Jessore. Such advances seem to have become endemic here, for we find the collector of this district referring to the loans taken by the "poorer classes of ryotts" as the "*invariable mode*" of agricultural production by the 1780s<sup>132</sup>. In Rangpur, merchants could also be seen participating directly in production, i.e. organizing production with the use of sharecroppers, apparently in a widely prevalent fashion<sup>133</sup>. It is tempting to posit a direct and widespread connection between the merchants and the process of agricultural reclamation during this period, but that would perhaps be over-reaching the available evidence.

The merchants' participation in agricultural production was guided not only by their long-term interests as merchants, but also by certain constraints upon Bengal's peasant economy and society which forced the producers to reach out to external agencies to fulfil crucial production requirements. One such constraint was shortage of material resources in the hands of the "inferior ryott" or "the poorer class of ryotts". Lack of resources made small peasant production vulnerable to any unbalancing forces, and the periodic incursions of famines and partial crop failures made this vulnerability chronic. It was precisely this susceptibility, caused by persistent shortage of working capital and uncertainties of production, which enabled merchants to enter the realm of production by a somewhat circuitous combination of subsistence and production loans.

Consumption loans were taken by the peasants for a variety of reasons, the chief of which appears to have been

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<sup>132</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/20, T. Henckell to Board, 7 May 1788; emphasis added.

<sup>133</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, f. 103.

to tide over particularly bad agricultural years<sup>134</sup>. In Birbhum, "money borrowed by the Ryotts assumes such a variety of shapes, that I [the collector] am at a loss what term to give it. Generally however [a loan] corresponds with the exigencies of a borrower"<sup>135</sup>. Interest on such loans ranged from 24 to 36 percent per annum depending on the dictates of the creditor.<sup>136</sup> In the context of a persistent shortage of the means of livelihood and productive resources, these subsistence loans were the first steps in what subsequently would become a vicious cycle<sup>137</sup>. Once a loan was incurred, a series of good harvests in *continuous succession* would be the *only* way in which households could circumvent the prospects of prolonged indebtedness. Alternating cycles of good and bad agricultural years, because of the impact these had on the price of their produce and on their incomes, tended to drive these peasant households further into arrears so that finally they were confronted by a seemingly insurmountable wall of debt servicing as well as a range of creditors. "His debts annually accumulating, the ryott becomes enslaved to his creditor or gutchdar" wrote Henry Colebrooke about the situation in Purnea<sup>138</sup>. Subsistence loans provided one lever by which merchants could get a grip over the end produce *antecedent* to any interference in

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<sup>134</sup> The problem of excessive vulnerability during scarce harvests was compounded by the virtual absence of any kind of financial help from the East India Company [see chapter 2].

<sup>135</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/35, 6 November 1787.

<sup>136</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/38, 15 December 1772; BRP, IOR P/70/35, 13 November 1787; Datta, 1986: 394.

<sup>137</sup> "Once begun, a chronic cycle of indebtedness tends to reproduce itself. Prior debt prevents saving after the harvest, because the creditor calls in his loan, and means of personal and productive consumption will consequently be likely to run short again before the next harvest" [H. Friedmann, 1980: 172].

<sup>138</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, 18 June 1790.



production.

Consumption loans were often accompanied by production loans, and it even seems probable that loans of the latter type tended to predominate. The "annual practice of the *byaparis* to advance to the poorer class of ryotts a sufficient quantity of grain to sow their lands, to be repaid in kind at the time of cutting their crops" had become the "*invariable mode*" in Jessore by the late 1780s<sup>139</sup>. Half the standing crop of Burdwan in October 1794<sup>140</sup> and "one half of the whole cultivation" of Dinajpur *circa* 1807<sup>141</sup> were estimated to be the products of production loans taken by the poorer peasants and the sharecroppers. The cultivators of Purnea were "accustomed to loans from the principal merchants which, however oppressive are absolutely necessary to them as they are unable to maintain cultivation unless they receive such assistance"<sup>142</sup>. In Rangpur, where the general level of indebtedness was said to be lower than in its neighbouring district of Dinajpur, loans for the production of grain had nevertheless grown into a "ruinous system" by the turn of the century<sup>143</sup>.

Production loans were given as advance payments<sup>144</sup> much before the commencement of the agricultural season, or as our sources describe "long before the crops of the

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<sup>139</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/20, 7 May 1788.

<sup>140</sup> WBSA, Grain, vol. 1, 17 October 1794.

<sup>141</sup> Martin, 1976, vol. 3: 906.

<sup>142</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/25, 26 May 1790.

<sup>143</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol 2, book 5, f. 84.

<sup>144</sup> "I am informed" wrote James Steuart in 1772 "that large sums of money are yearly lent out to the occupiers [sic] of the lands in order to advance the improvements of the soil. The interest exacted for such loans is exorbitant because *the repayment of capital is precarious*" [ "Memoirs of the Coinage in Bengal" IOR, Home Misc., vol. 62, p. 46; emphasis added].

poorer ryotts are fit to gather"<sup>145</sup>. Bengal had two major agricultural seasons, the winter (*aman*) and the spring (*aus*), and loans were contracted on both occasions. The winter rice harvest was considered of greater market value "bearing a higher price and sought after by all"<sup>146</sup> and was therefore a prime area of merchant intervention. The seedlings for this harvest were universally sown in the Bengali month of *Assar* (June-July) and reaped in *Agrahan* (November-December). Advances on this crop were made in the months of *Pous* or *Magh* (December-January-February) and the repayments were made in the subsequent month of *Agrahan*, thereby completing a yearly cycle of loans and repayments<sup>147</sup>. For the spring (*aus*) crop, merchant strategies were two-fold: *gomasthas* (commissioned agents) would be sent to the villages "to purchase it from the ryotts before they could dispose of their surplus crops"<sup>148</sup>; alternatively, advances to the cultivator were made in the month of *Assin* (September-October), six months before sowing in the month of *Baisakh* (April-May), to be repaid next *Assin*, immediately after the harvest in the month of *Bhadro* (August-September)<sup>149</sup>. The timing of these loans was critical as any delay, even by a month, could lessen the amount of interest in the annual cycle of advances and repayments. Thus a "man who shall make advances in Bhadoon [*Bhadro*] expects and obtains a greater increase than the man who makes his advance in *Assin*", wrote a contemporary observer in October 1794 in relation to the system of

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<sup>145</sup> WBSA, Grain, vol.1, 17 October 1794.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 29 October 1794.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid; emphasis added.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 17 October 1794; BRC, IOR P/51/21, 29 January 1788.

advances for the aus crop<sup>150</sup>.

Such loans were not limited to the cultivation of rice alone. Almost all major agricultural products were tilled under varying degrees of advance contracts. As discussed in chapter 5, betel-leaf in east Bengal, and sugarcane in Birbhum were based on such arrangements with merchants who then sent the entire amount of refined sugar to Calcutta. Tobacco grown in Nadia and Rangpur was partly financed through advances by the merchants of Calcutta, Dhaka and Murshidabad, and the rest was purchased by their agents on the spot. Ginger produced in Rangpur was sold immediately by the farmers to merchants as "the whole is paid for in advance"<sup>151</sup>.

How did these loans operate? The terms on which such loans were given were elaborately laid down. First, the peasant contracting for these loans was not given any written documents; the whole episode was conducted on a "verbal basis"<sup>152</sup>. Second, he was to receive a maximum of two-thirds of the value contracted for in advance and the "balance at the delivery of grain and at the rate that may first be established in the pergunnah after the reaping is over"<sup>153</sup>; but the proportion of the total loan being given in advance depended upon the type of rice being cultivated. Thus in Purnea, peasants cultivating winter (*aman*) rice could hope to get up to half the amount in advance while those cultivating the intrinsically inferior spring (*aus*) grain had to be satisfied with a quarter<sup>154</sup>. Third, the terms of the agreement had to be faithfully "observed and

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<sup>150</sup> cit.Datta,1986: 396.

<sup>151</sup> IOL,Ms. Eur.D.75,vol.2,book 4,f.16.

<sup>152</sup> BRP,IOR P/71/26,18 June 1790.

<sup>153</sup> WBSA,Grain,vol.1,22 October 1794.

<sup>154</sup> BRP,IOR P/71/26,18 June 1790.The retention of a portion of the contracted advance by the lender was a device to subsequently under-price the producer.

abided" by the borrower as he was "*under penalty* of making good every loss that may occur [to the creditor] from non-payment, in addition to the amount being returned with interest"<sup>155</sup>.

Regarding the modes of repayment, it appears that the interest charged on such loans was higher than what was demanded on loans of immediate subsistence. The available evidence suggests that these were to be repaid in kind at rates ranging from 38 to 50 percent<sup>156</sup>, which would be the interest on such loans one and a half times greater than on loans for consumption. Moreover, the price mechanism under which such loans were given was crucial as well as additionally profitable for the merchants. These were advanced six months *before* the commencement of the sowing season when prices were at their highest in the seasonal swing. Repayments had to be made immediately *after* the harvest when prices were at their lowest<sup>157</sup>, thereby making the cultivator part with a larger portion of the produce while making adjustments for the seasonal price variation. The loans "are made in the season when grain is dearest and repaid when the price is lowest"<sup>158</sup>. Peasants could stand to lose between "2 annas per rupee"<sup>159</sup> (or 12.5 percent) and 25 percent<sup>160</sup> in real terms while making these adjustments. "The cultivators, of necessity, have to bear with all this", remarked an Indian observer of agrarian

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<sup>155</sup> WBSA, Grain, vol.1, 22 October 1794. Here the word amount means the entire amount of the loan and not just the portion actually given.

<sup>156</sup> Datta, 1986: 393, 399.

<sup>157</sup> "Settlement of account takes place as the crops come in" [BRC, IOR P/51/29, 29 January 1788].

<sup>158</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, 26 April 1790; also Colebrooke, *Remarks*, p.67; Datta, 1986: 399-400.

<sup>159</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/21, 29 January 1788.

<sup>160</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 4, f. 84.

matters in this period<sup>161</sup>.

These loans symbolize the intrusion of merchant capital into the very core of Bengal's economy; they also provide the <sup>o</sup>p<sub>int</sub> of reference for studying the dynamics of social domination over the processes of agricultural production. These loans had become the "usual and long standing custom"<sup>162</sup> between the merchant and the peasant all over Bengal, which meant that, apart from debt servicing, the cultivators were tied into selling straight to the merchant "in preference to bringing grain to the market"<sup>163</sup>. It is therefore hardly surprising that the trader could procure his supplies *without* having to make "purchases with ready money"<sup>164</sup>. Loans for subsistence signified the penetration of the *byapari*, through the channel of peasant consumption, into the end produce of that peasant's labour *without* exerting a direct influence over the process of production. A consumption loan therefore placed the economic *surplus* of a peasant household from one agricultural cycle to another to the next at the disposal of the merchant. The loans given as an advance on production were more complex, so were the effects they had.

Theoretically, an advance for production could be given under two situations. In the first situation, advances could represent the payment for a commodity (i.e, as a realization of the price of a commodity) *before* the commodity was actually handed over, which could only happen *after* the completion of the production cycle. An advance of this type would represent a means of purchase. Such was the situation in the *dadni* (advance contracts) system in the early eighteenth century between the indigenous textile

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<sup>161</sup> Anonymous, *Risala-i-Zira'at* (tr. Harbans Mukhia), section vii, p.12, (mimeo).

<sup>162</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/21, 14 June 1788.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 14 June 1788.

<sup>164</sup> IOL, Ms. Eur. D. 75, vol. 2, book 4, f. 84.

merchants and the East India Company.

The second situation would prevail where advances were given as loans of *working capital*, and this was quite extensively developed in the late eighteenth century. Here advances were given to *commence* production as well as to meet the costs of the producer's subsistence. The social nature of such loans therefore differed substantially from that of the first type in so far as the advance now covered both the reproduction costs of labour (the costs of subsistence) and the reproduction of the devices of production (seeds, draught animals and ploughs). These loans were advances at the start of the production cycle and covered two of its most critical components: labour and working capital. The third component, land, still belonged to the primary producer, but the fact that the other two were indirectly controlled by the merchant led to a subtle reconstitution of the entire process of production. The trader could henceforth control both the labour time and the end produce of the peasant. The peasant technically still owned the land but it was the merchant who *effectively* determined its use. The content of appropriation also changed. In a situation where advances were given as the realization of the price of a commodity, what accrued was a profit. Where advances represented the flow of merchant capital in production what was appropriated was the *surplus product* from *within* the process of production. This explains why merchants in places like Dinajpur and Rangpur could use the system of advances to get grain from the peasants without using ready cash while making their purchases, and the subordination inherent in this kind of relationship becomes evident in a petition of the *raiylats* of *pargana* Burdwan in which they clearly accept that it "is *only* because of the merchants that we have the means of *purchasing our subsistence and preserving our lives*"<sup>165</sup>. The power inherent in a

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<sup>165</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/37, 30 August 1774; emphasis added.

relationship of this kind is apparent from the fact that when the merchants decided to call in, or discontinue such loans, the peasants were immediately "obliged to dispose of their grain on any terms"<sup>166</sup> to appease the merchants as without their financial assistance "the Ryotts suffer the greatest distress"<sup>167</sup>.

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<sup>166</sup> CCR, IOR P/68/7, 4 May 1781.

<sup>167</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/20, 11 October 1790.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusions: Agrarian Society and Economy of Bengal in the Late Eighteenth Century**

One of the central objectives of this thesis has been to establish that the late eighteenth century in Bengal was a period of intense commercialization, brought about by a combination of four factors: (i) a rising demand for food and increasing agricultural prices, (ii) integrated provincial markets, (iii) the revenue regime of the East India Company and (iv) a cluster of famine and dearth seasons. Each chapter therefore attempted to come to grips with the numerous ways in which such a process was unleashed and the social relations which caused this development, and were in turn re-shaped as a consequence. It is perhaps necessary to address the major issues involved in order to perceive the dynamics of the process in a comprehensible form.

To start with, one of the central arguments of the thesis has been to state that dearth and famine in our period were subsistence crises of differing magnitudes in an intrinsically commercialized economy (i.e. an economy where access to food was determined by access to markets), and these events tended to intensify the processes which occasioned them initially. The discussion in chapter 2 has perhaps indicated the correlation between bad harvests and spiralling prices as two of the most important variables in causing famine and dearth in eighteenth century Bengal.



Thus a real decline in per capita availability of food emerged as the distinct feature of these events even in the middle of low levels of subsistence. The fact that prices of food in the epicentre of such events tended to push prices upwards in places not similarly affected must point to the price mechanism as *the* crucial factor in determining the magnitude, spatial spread and the social context of the subsequent misery. There is therefore, following Amartya Sen, a strong case for arguing that famines, and even dearth, were severe "entitlement/endowment crises" for the harvest sensitive strata in Bengal.

There was practically no institutional financial support for the afflicted either to cope with or to recover from such disasters. There was furthermore very little support from the village community or from "traditional" ties of dependence and mutual help. What about the "moral economy" of the poor? Essential to the "moral-economy" argument are the conceptions of shared-poverty and mutual assistance in a society living on the edge of frequent crises of subsistence. Such threats are seen as the main motivating force in the creation of elaborate patron-client relationships and village hierarchies which are therefore mutually sustaining<sup>1</sup>.

The evidence from eighteenth century Bengal provides very little in the way of supporting such conceptions. Customary expectations of succour from local landed proprietors were the first to disappear. Each cycle of adverse weather--harvest failure--subsistence crisis created a fresh run of demand for *tagavi* and remission of revenue from the producers which the local *zamindar* or *talluqdar* was unable to provide. Incidents such as a dearth or a famine immediately reduced their incomes and affected their capacity to help the distressed producers. The state's financial burdens (i.e. its revenue demand)

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<sup>1</sup> See Arnold [1988: 80-86] for the main postulates and critique of the "moral-economy" thesis.

remained largely unrelenting thereby hitting at their ability of granting remissions of revenue, or even of providing charitable relief in times of distress. It is perhaps significant that gruel kitchens had been organized in the city of Murshidabad during the famine of 1769/70<sup>2</sup>, but in the famine of 1788 there were no such places of sustenance. Therefore, one of the features noted in nineteenth century famines-- an immediate contraction of urban private charity in the midst of high prices and food-shortages<sup>3</sup>, certainly appears to have been well developed in the late eighteenth century. The reasons for such contraction were many. Principally they were centred around the fact that such actions were no longer central since the so-called "traditional" social relations were increasingly proving inadequate to meet the necessities of that specific historical situation.

Some efforts to lessen the burdens on the producers were nevertheless made by the landed proprietors from time to time. Thus after the famine of 1769/70 the *talluqdars* in the revenue-paying circle (*chakla*) of Murshidabad were said to be spending "a great effort in improving their lands & in extending cultivation at great expense, in advancing money to the ryotts to clear the lands for cultivation and devoting their time and attention to superintend & direct the improvement of them"<sup>4</sup>. *Zamindars* of Malda had "zealously" advanced "10 or 15000 ru[pee]s for Tuccavy" in order to reduce the sufferings of the peasants owing to the "Calamity inflicted by the Heavens" in 1769<sup>5</sup>. But such efforts were too few and too little to achieve any substantial recovery in a post-crisis period. This was so

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<sup>2</sup> Ghulam Hussain Tabatabai, *Seir-ul-Mutakherin*, trans. Haji Mustapha, Calcutta, 1902, volume 3, pp. 56-57.

<sup>3</sup> A.P. MacDonnell, 1876: 310.

<sup>4</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol. 8, 30 December 1770.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, 10 December 1770.

for two reasons.

First, as has been mentioned, dearth or famine posed financial problems for such people as these events jeopardized their incomes from agricultural production. The following petition from the *zamindars* of Rangpur during the flood of 1787 reveals the likely conditions of small landed proprietors during natural disasters:

We are poor zemindars, and you are not ignorant of the least circumstance of our condition for the last eighteen months. We have no other income than our private lands... and even that though managed with the greatest frugality is hardly sufficient to defray the necessary expenses of cloths and sustenance in so much that we can only afford to wear the meanest dresses even when our duty calls us to attend upon you [the collector]. We have this year been under the *necessity of mortgaging to the bankers the small quantities of private lands which were allowed to us...* . We are in the utmost distress, and have no prospect of supporting ourselves<sup>6</sup>.

Larger *zamindars* (like the Rajas of Burdwan, Nadia, Birbhum, Dinajpur and Rajshahi) were not so crippled, but they were certainly constrained which meant that the peasants in such lands were unable to recuperate in proper time. Thus the peasants in the northern *parganas* of Nadia (which had been worst hit by the drought and famine of 1769/70) could not commence agricultural operations "from the suspense they are in to know from whom they are to receive advances to enable them to go through the business of cultivation"<sup>7</sup>. Large tracts of intrinsically good quality land were still lying *pateet* in this district in 1776 because of the financial inability of the *zamindar* to

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<sup>6</sup> The collector of Rangpur vouched that this petition "contains a true and faithful description of the state of the district" [BRC, IOR P/51/12, 4 September 1787].

<sup>7</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol. 5, 23 May 1771.

provide *taqavi*<sup>8</sup>. During the disaster of 1788 the cultivators in Rajshahi had no traditional sources of help to turn to since this district "is peculiarly circumstanced, having at present in fact no zemindar to any useful purpose, nor any inferior landholders in a condition to do much to assist the Ryotts"<sup>9</sup>.

Second, there is no reason to assume that financial help provided by these landed proprietors was an extension of traditional ties of patronage and dependence. Bengal was a highly commercialized economy, and the available evidence suggests that the assistance given to the peasants to settle their ruined affairs was designed by the *zamindars* to tie the cultivators in the grip of extended indebtedness, the ultimate purpose of which was to have unfettered access to their labour or to prevent subsequent desertions. It is perhaps extremely significant that all seed-loans made by the *zamindars* were to be returned "two-fold to the person who furnished it"<sup>10</sup> and each money-advance was invariably taxed "with a heavy interest", while repayments were "fraudulently devalued"<sup>11</sup>. Therefore the facts that villagers were forced to abandon their habitations, their fields and a whole set of established relations at the slightest sign of dearth, or that they could actually die of starvation, or were forced to sell their last belongings (even their children, and perhaps their wives) are significant for they show a total collapse of the so-called "moral-economy" of the poor in rural society.

One important conclusion which can be reached from the analysis of dearth and famine is that these subjected *all* social groups to the vicissitudes of the market. A bad agricultural year was only a proximate cause of a famine or

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<sup>8</sup> CCR, IOR P/67/62, 13 June 1776.

<sup>9</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/20, 7 May 1788.

<sup>10</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/26, 26 April 1790

<sup>11</sup> SCC, IOR P/A/9, 16 August 1769.

dearth, the actual deprivation was caused by a per capita food availability decline because people could not afford to buy food at prevailing prices and there were practically no other "traditional" avenues open to them to get sustained relief. Situations of dearth resulted in a flight of grain to areas with higher food prices and this flight was a *conscious* mercantile strategy to reap maximum profits from a situation of acute distress. The flight of grain was not always directed towards the cities. It is true that in general price-differentials were higher in the towns but a dearth or a famine forced prices in the countryside to rise at par with those prevailing in towns. There was therefore a cross-flow of grain with the merchant as its pivot. Merchants invariably disregarded attempts made by the state to impose embargoes on the export of food during crisis years (chapter 6). This fact is crucial in so far as it shows that mercantile accumulation occurred under conditions of great uncertainty, and that it was done not in subordination to the state but in direct *contravention* of its authority.

A famine (even a dearth) in eighteenth century Bengal can therefore no longer be visualized as a mere food-shortage in a subsistence economy. These episodes reveal a highly commercialized economy in the throes of massive crises of subsistence. It was precisely this commercialization which influenced the availability or absence of food for the harvest-sensitive strata in the province. The need to circumvent or cope with such crises furthered the pace of commercialization.

In sum, famine and dearth had the following economic consequences. For the producers the essential questions were those of survival and economic reproduction. Our evidence shows that both requirements were linked to the larger issue of productive resources which were continuously hit by such crises which made it was impossible for the majority of the peasants in Bengal to cope and recover from the effects of such episodes on their

own assets. This in turn led them to look to external agencies of support. Their problems were worsened by the absence of any substantial state help. This led to the creation of coping strategies which were fraught with a number of significant economic implications. First, the market became the central determinant of agricultural production, and second access to the market was henceforth mediated by the grain merchants. Insecurity can therefore be advanced as one crucial factor in furthering the commercialization of Bengal's rice production in our period, when the very act of coping thus became an act of commercial production and exploitation. The combination of the two in this period had profound consequences both for the state of the agricultural economy and for the social relations which were shaped in the realm of agricultural production, especially those between the merchants and the peasants.

Three concerns central to our comprehension of dearth and famines are (i) that these occurrences were primarily critical crises of subsistence, (ii) they generated conditions of extended aggravation in the living conditions of a whole range of producers and labourers because of their already acute shortage of resources, and (iii) they created major dislocations in the rhythms of economic production which could not be rectified by taking recourse to traditional sources of support. Therefore, for the producers the problems of coping with, or recovering from, a dearth or a famine could only be resolved by looking for sources located *outside* their traditional boundaries. The questions are, who were these agencies, and what was the price exacted by them for such help?

One important aspect which emerged while discussing the causes of dearth and famine is that most peasants were thrown into the market to purchase food from a specialized community of grain-merchants who were the only major agency for the bulk distribution of food during such situations. The second important aspect, central to the entire matrix

of agricultural production, was that these peasants were dependent on the merchants for a wide variety of loans of consumption and capital. The economic constraints which engendered these two aspects assumed critical proportions during a subsistence crisis, and the result was that all recovery made subsequently, or the manner in which producers coped, was made to depend on the dictates of these grain-traders-cum-usurers. If the producer sought the market to survive during a crisis, the market found the producer in its aftermath.

It must also be remembered that the major problem after a major crisis of subsistence was that of regressive indebtedness which affected *all* categories of peasants in varying degrees. Under such a situation the gains, if any, made by the surviving peasants were bound to be short-lived as the next crisis would invariably throw-up a new crop of dispossessed migrants into the ranks of the rural poor. The apparently substantial proliferation of sharecroppers (variously called *adhiars*, *bargadars* and *profakisans*) in the late eighteenth century, despite the favourable land-man ratio and demand for labour, can be mainly explained by the protracted impoverishment of the small-peasant by dearth and famine. The distinction between the rich and the poor in peasant society was extremely small and often shattered by even the slightest variation in agricultural output or price.

In many ways, dearth and famine constituted the single most powerful influence on agricultural production and in creating conditions for a large-scale impoverishment of Bengal's small-peasantry in the late eighteenth century. These were also jointly responsible for causing fundamental shifts in local economic configurations through which the cultivators were subjected to the dictates of external financial agencies. Thus after the famine of 1788, the cultivators of Dhaka:

Have borrowed sums at extravagant interest

to enable them to cultivate a part of their lands; which will absorb in a greater degree, if not wholly their expected profits, so that at the commencement of the next season their situation is consequently little improved, and the same necessity for borrowing money every year will remain. Hence it follows they are likely to proceed in the shackles of vexatious and oppressive usurers, and consequently [sic] under difficulties, that must ever prevent those exertions necessary perhaps even to their existence<sup>12</sup>.

This is an important statement which indicates the mechanisms and extent of peasant impoverishment after a famine. It also points to the constraint of resources as a critical factor in hampering the pace of self-generated recovery after crises of such magnitude, and indicates the degree to which financial agencies situated outside these local peasant-economies used these events to penetrate into the very core of agricultural production.

The description of the plight of the peasants of Dhaka during the famine of 1788 is also an excellent representation of their consumption needs during a famine and their subsequent productive requirements coalescing to create the *sine quae non* of their dependence on such traders and moneylenders. A similar situation was recorded for the cultivators of western Bengal after the famine of 1769/70, to survive and recover from which they were forced to borrow "from different merchants at a most exorbitant and unheard of premium"<sup>13</sup>. Such loans were not limited to famines alone; they were contracted with equally crippling consequences in times of dearth. Peasants were forced to desert because the merchants in Burdwan stopped providing rice to them. They were forced into petitioning the state to "oblige the merchants to turn the grain in [their] hands

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<sup>12</sup> BRC, IOR P/51/51, Part 1, 9 December 1789.

<sup>13</sup> WBSA, CCRM, vol. 5, 18 May 1771.



to us, setting what profit they deem just" as that was the only way in which "we can purchase our subsistence and preserve our lives"<sup>14</sup>. "Without the assistance of merchants the Ryotts suffer the greatest distress"<sup>15</sup> seems a good summary of the structure of merchant-peasant linkages effected through the medium of peasant consumption during times of scarcity.

Turning to the question of landed property it was argued that its real significance, its structure and working, in the late eighteenth century cannot be understood in the narrow confines of revenue administration alone. The other explanation, that of an almost complete collapse of landed property under the financial pressures of the Company, appears inadequate as an interpretation. It is undeniable that a number of *zamindaris* disintegrated, but new ones were formed with equal speed. Some *talluqdar*s could become bankrupt, but that did not stop others from bidding for *talluqas*; nor did it prevent *zamindars* from attempting to usurp *talluqdaris* and to oppose governmental plans to separate *talluqas* from their jurisdictions.

Landed property was not a closed shop. Access to it by birth (or caste) was equally balanced by entry through purchase or office, and when a landed property was sold a whole range of potential buyers (from *zamindars* to merchants to "ryotts") would come forward with their bids<sup>16</sup>. Such sales had created a plethora of small landed proprietors. In Dhaka for instance nearly 20,000 *talluqdaris* had been established by sale of *zamindari* lands between 1765 and 1790: *zamindari* officials and *ijaradars* bought the larger properties, while others bought lands no

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<sup>14</sup> BRC, IOR P/49/42, 22 August 1774 and 7 December 1773.

<sup>15</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/30, 11 October 1790.

<sup>16</sup> See BRC, IOR P/49/40, 16 May 1773; Ibid., P/49/55, 5 September 1775; Ibid., P/50/61, 17 September 1785; BRP, IOR P/71/26, 4 June 1790.

larger than average peasant holdings<sup>17</sup>.

Such sales do not necessarily reflect the financially distressed state of the property. Auctioning the property of a bankrupt *zamindar* or *talluqdar* was only one form of land sales. Most properties were still sold privately and prices were negotiated by the parties concerned outside the state's purview. In fact *talluqdaris* were created by sales of this type: each sale deed was properly witnessed, endorsed and registered at the *zamindari sadr*. It is true that land values did not appear high enough to observers versed in European property prices. It is also true that there were distress sales when lands were put up at prices lower than the *jama* of the current year, but these have to be seen in consonance with the facts that *zamindaris* could fetch five times the assessed revenue and *la-kharaji* could easily be worth ten times its estimated produce, prices which appear strikingly high in a situation where a sale price equal to two years *jama* was considered of good value in the market<sup>18</sup>.

In any case the supposedly low sale values did not pose major barriers in the way of a land market in Bengal. On the contrary such sales seem to have been on the increase during our period. Cornwallis's belief that "purchasers of Zemindarry land are become very numerous since the acquisition of the Dewanny"<sup>19</sup> aptly describes the connection between a land market and landed property in the province.

Property in land could also develop by other means. Being a *zamindari* official was often a passport to landed property. A "small pecuniary consideration for the

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<sup>17</sup> *Talluqdari jama* ranged from 76001 rupees to 3.5 rupees per annum in Dhaka [BRC, IOR P/50/61, 30 September 1785 and BRP, IOR P/71/26, 4 June 1790].

<sup>18</sup> John Shore to Board, BRC, IOR P/51/27, 26 November 1788.

<sup>19</sup> BRP, IOR P/70/23, 18 June 1787.

zemindars" was allegedly enough to enable *zamindari amils* to acquire *hasil* lands "recorded in moffussul accounts as bazee zemin" in Jessore<sup>20</sup>. In *pargana* Bikrampur *qanungoes* and *mohrirs* had managed to obtain "a greater property in the Pergunnah than the Zemindars themselves now hold... and to prevent detection of these and other acts of a like fraudulent nature have either destroyed, or keep concealed, the original papers of the pergunnah by which alone the true jumma can be ascertained"<sup>21</sup>. While corruption was one important factor in allowing officials to establish footholds in landed property (at least this was the official explanation given by the Company while coming to terms with the power of the *zamindari* officialdom) the situation was certainly more complex. Equally potent was the role of "long custom & possession" of offices which in Bakarganj allowed the *tahsildars*, initially appointed by government to supervise collection of revenue from *huzuri talluqdars* to acquire "a sort of hereditary claim to their management from which they derive pecuniary advantage, as well as influence of consequence". These *tahsildars*:

Can for some time to come have no such hereditary claim as the zemindars, tho' there is no doubt that possession may at some future period give them a handle to set up pleas of the same kind. Thus a *new set of men will be set up*, who will *claim property* to which they have no title, at the expense of those who are already admitted to possess, or supposed to have, a right in the soil<sup>22</sup>.

Finally there were the *la-kharaji* holders who effectively constituted the only real owners of privileged

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<sup>20</sup> BRP, IOR P/71/13, 27 August 1787.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., P/70/30, 21 June 1787.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., P/71/26, 4 June 1790; emphasis added.

property in late eighteenth century Bengal because they paid no revenue in a situation where other landed proprietors were facing a heavy financial squeeze. The *Nizamat* had apparently encouraged the establishment of such rights as one device of pacifying the province's frontiers. The Company's state could not touch these rights as they had become entrenched over a long period<sup>23</sup>. The *zamindars* continued with grants of this type, albeit on a somewhat reduced scale after 1765, in keeping with their traditional functions of patronage, but the evidence also suggests quite strongly that such lands were also used by them for their own purposes: after all one of the most persistent suspicions harboured by the Company was that *la-kharaji* was often another *zamindari* device to acquire a haven of tax-free assets.

The consensual image of these proprietors as rentier-administrators essentially removed from the sphere of agricultural production has been substantially rejected in this discussion. Instead what has been advanced is a picture where landed property is seen symbiotically related to production and marketing of agricultural produce. Altruism or benevolence had nothing to do with such investments<sup>24</sup>. B. B. Chaudhury sees their participation in production as a "source of increased rental income", but does not consider their participation as a conscious economic strategy adopted by a composite social class. For Chaudhuri, investment in production was a matter of an individual *zamindar's* choice or foresight, and as soon as rental incomes were maximized *zamindars* would generally

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<sup>23</sup> See Sinha [1968: 274-75] for the failure of the East India Company to exercise control, i.e. get revenue or acquire information about the actual state or extent of these lands before the Permanent Settlement; also Marshall [1987: 126].

<sup>24</sup> Sinha [1968: 217] suggests that *zamindars* in pre-Permanent Settlement Bengal "were not unlike the great banyan trees that shade the countryside" and after that Act their powers became "extra legal, para feudal".

withdraw from production<sup>25</sup>. Chaudhuri's views are difficult to sustain in our period for three reasons.

First, our evidence shows quite strongly that a substantial portions of *zamindari* incomes (at times as high as 35 per cent) were derived from the sale of produce grown in their *khamar* lands. Therefore such sales must induce a necessary shift in our emphasis from rental incomes to profits being derived from the marketing of the agricultural surplus. Second, the patterns of surplus appropriation in their *khamar* lands were based on a specifically determined relationship between investment and labour use. Sharecropping on the *khamar* was more than the attempted maximization of rental income. It entailed the exploitation of the producers' *surplus* (both labour and product) *within* production and during the distribution of the product. Sharecropping additionally meant the establishment of a notional wage for labour which the *zamindars* forcefully tried to depress in order to *maximize* the flow of surplus in their favour. Third, *zamindars* were not the only landed proprietors in Bengal. They were certainly the dominant ones, but equal emphasis must be given to the roles performed by the *talluqdars* and *la-kharaji* holders in order to get a proper perspective of the intermeshing of landed property with agricultural production.

Finally, one has to consider landed property in the context of social stratification. The fact that people holding *zamindari*, *talluqdari* and *la-kharaji* rights represented different grades of property, or that they were hierarchically organized must not detract from considering these people as a composite class positioned over an entire range of small-holding, and often undifferentiated, peasantry (see chapter 4). Socially they were the rural elites, a position often bestowed by birth or descent but one which could also easily be acquired by ready money.

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<sup>25</sup> B.B.Chaudhuri, 1984: 143-44.

Economically they were without doubt the rural rich by virtue of the resources which were concentrated in their hands. Our evidence has shown that nearly 10 per cent of the gross agricultural output in the late eighteenth century was controlled by *la-kharaji* holders alone. The *zamindars* controlled a lot more: their *nankar* alone comprised ten percent of the gross *jama* of the entire province. Did rural society have any other strata who could claim similar economic or social power?

The discussion in chapter 4 suggested the widespread existence of two major peasant-strata-- the middling and the poor-- in pre-Permanent Settlement Bengal as two analytical labels to make sense out of the profusion of cross cutting peasant rights and categories which seem to have caused so much confusion amongst the early Company administrators. It has also been argued that locating a "rich" peasant "class" in our period embodies a number of difficulties, the chief of which is the lack of evidence. It additionally leads to the essentially unhistorical exercise of reading a late-nineteenth century situation into the eighteenth, and to generalize from scanty evidence pertaining to two north-Bengal districts (Dinajpur and Rangpur) for the whole of Bengal. The rich-peasant thesis is unacceptable for our period also because of the smallness of peasant holdings in *general*, the favourable land-labour ratio, the absence of inequalities *within* the peasants on the basis of unequal landholding and the virtual non-existence either of land concentration in a few *peasant* hands or the dispossession of others.

Obviously there were a number of regional variations. Even the same peasant-right could have differing social contexts within a single district. Thus some *pahikashta* cultivators in Burdwan were considered "superior ryotts" while others occupied positions no better than sharecroppers; in other districts they were apparently indistinguishable from day labourers. But these variations should not detract from attempting to establish features

common to the peasants as a social class. The first of these features was the very nature of their enterprise. Without exception peasants were persons who cultivated their land with their personal and/or domestic labour and paid revenue. Another common feature was the emergence of sharecroppers from the poorer peasantry all over the province. Additionally, the manner in which the crop was to be shared, the provision of capital inputs invariably charged with heavy interest rates and the methods of exploiting these peasants show basic similarities in all districts where sharecroppers were used. These similarities constituted the core of commercial production and exploitation in a small-peasant economy.

The other common ground was the geographical mobility of a large section of the peasantry. Descriptions of peasant families, even entire villages, moving from one area to another in search of somewhat better terms even under normal circumstances abound in our sources. In fact the growth of *pahikashta* in our period was entirely the product of the peasants' propensity to move with their families and meagre belongings. The result was that a "pergunnah covered with small villages to day appears depopulated the next"<sup>26</sup>. But this spatial mobility was not necessarily accompanied by social improvement, nor did it reflect a better bargaining position of labour. The evidence unequivocally shows that the mobile peasants were also the poorest who moved because of the scanty resources, or were forced to migrate because of natural disasters (floods or droughts) culminating in a dearth or a famine. In the latter cases, mobility amounted to a permanent displacement of a destitute peasantry. In a land-abundant situation they did manage to resettle themselves, but there is no reason to believe that their conditions improved over the long-term. Migration provided only a temporary respite from the crippling burdens of taxation and scanty

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<sup>26</sup> BRC, IOR P/52/5,10 February 1790; also Buchanan, "Ronggoppur", IOL, Ms. Eur.D.75, vol.1, book 1, f.110.

resources.

Agrarian Bengal was in essence composed of clusters of small-holding peasants. The richness of one social cluster and the poverty of another was only a matter of degree, and downward social spirals were more likely to happen than upward mobility. Late nineteenth and early twentieth observations that peasant society in eastern Bengal was more homogeneous than in the west and the north<sup>27</sup>, and the suggestion that agrarian society in western and northern Bengal was highly polarized between the rich farmer and sharecropper, whereas the one in the east was predominantly small-holding<sup>28</sup> may not be valid to describe the situation in the late eighteenth century for a number of reasons.

First, peasants in our period were overwhelmingly smallholders. Second, the "farming" system in north Bengal was still rudimentary, and the use of sharecroppers was prevalent over the entire province. Third, stratification within the *peasantry* (as distinct from rural inequalities) was yet elementary. Though the potential for large-scale impoverishment was ever present in the economy, there were very few avenues of selective enrichment. Even the so-called "village oligarchy" in districts like Birbhum, Rajshahi and Dinajpur (often accused of being "refractory" and "rebellious" by the Company's administrators) do not represent anything more than fragments of the middle-ranking peasantry trying to cope with rapidly changing, and often uncertain, configurations in rural Bengal engendered by the Company's revenue regime and by the permanently daunting spectre of famine and dearth. Moreover, the extent to which they were actually *peasants* remains an enigma. Our sources clearly indicate a strong presence of *zamindari* officials among such people: a fact which must surely indicate the inadequacy of labelling them as a "rich"

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<sup>27</sup> See Marshall [1987: 22-23] for a discussion of these views.

<sup>28</sup> S.Bose, 1986: chapter 1.



peasant "class".

The study of local trade in agricultural produce highlighted two essential developments in Bengal's economy in the eighteenth century. First it indicated the formation of a regionally integrated market for grain in the province. Second it pointed to the primacy of the merchant in the domain of local trade and to its economic implications. Both these features definitely show an economy undergoing a significant degree of commercialization.

A combination of rising demand for food, both in the towns and (perhaps more crucially) in the villages, and state intervention, especially after 1757, created the necessary milieu in which local markets were integrated into an extensive provincial network. Here demand influenced the cross-flow of supplies from areas which were otherwise geographically dispersed, and prices in one area swayed the movement of goods from far-flung bases of procurement. This period may have been the first time in the history of the province when *hats* became an integral part of a wider commercial network. The formation of a home market for agricultural produce benefited the merchants most, and it is the dominance of the *byapari* in the market for agricultural produce which is an extremely interesting phenomenon. These merchants could jointly regulate the flow of food to the towns and to the countryside even if it amounted to a contravention of the state's authority. They could control prices and even influence their formation in the various rungs of markets, including the modest *hat*. It was the integration of the *hat* in to the wider networks of regional flow of food which provides the crucial insight into the nature of marketing systems in the eighteenth century. In his study of the north Indian situation Bayly has remarked that "a fixed *ganj* indicates a higher level of economic activity than the bi-weekly peasant markets or *haths*"<sup>29</sup>. Nevertheless, in measuring the quantity and

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<sup>29</sup> C.A.Bayly, 1983: 99.

direction of commodity circulation, the role of the big markets has to be studied in conjunction with the role, numbers and spatial distribution of intermediate or even small networks of distribution like the *hats*. The latter provided the crucial mediating agencies of trade leading to the towns or even outside the province. Any increase in their numbers, or their establishment in previously deficient areas (and the evidence does show that both were happening in the eighteenth century) would enable the peasantry to relate more easily to the market and facilitate the creation of a pervasive gamut of mercantile functions. A *hat* therefore no longer signified a "peasant" market (as systems of exchange in a predominantly subsistence economy)<sup>30</sup> in eighteenth century Bengal. The increasing frequency of commercial transactions at all levels of markets, and the rapid completion of commercial circuits *within* the village *hat* were the salient features of local trade in our period which created, to use Perlin's words, "a hierarchic interdependency between general and local [economic] activities"<sup>31</sup>.

The merchants in their trading ventures displayed an extremely well-developed mercantile acumen (the use of command, capital and coercion) to control agricultural trade. The use of advance contracts for procurement, the creation of a widespread chain of trading intermediaries who were linked through a centralized administration of capital, and their responses to price movements suggest a rational business ethic which perhaps was no different from their contemporaries in West European markets. The degree of functional specialization by a whole range of merchants (from the big town-based wholesaler to the small shopkeeper to the *tahbazari*) is perhaps a clear indication of the intricate nature of the trade in agricultural produce as well as the symptom of the scale of differentiation which

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<sup>30</sup> George Dalton, 1974: 240-43.

<sup>31</sup> Frank Perlin, 1983: 75.

existed in these specialized merchant communities<sup>32</sup>.

Finally, the crucial positions occupied by these merchants in the matrix of agricultural production, and the mechanisms by which these roles were translated into levers of social domination over the peasants emerged as some of the most important developments in Bengal's agrarian economy. It would perhaps not be entirely unjustified to speak of the late eighteenth century in Bengal as the period when merchant-capital took its first major grip over the rice producing small peasant-economy. The use of a variety of loans to ensure steady returns on investments, and to acquire a grip over the producers choice in the market were devices shaped by the merchants to cover the risks of investing among peasants with very little resources or reserves, and in an economy often shaken by natural calamities and price oscillations. Yet they engendered what could only have been a *silent transformation of petty production in agriculture*.

One can justifiably speak of a transformation because of the speed with which the so-called "subsistence" sector of production was brought within the framework of an integrated market, which allowed *non-peasant* groups (merchants and *zamindars*) to intrude into the very core of agricultural production, viz., the cultivation of rice and other food-items in this period. At the same time, however, this was a silent process because it was achieved without any major social upheavals or fundamental changes in the social context of production. In essence, the agrarian situation in the eighteenth century was characterized by clusters of commercial regimes exploiting the surplus-product of a small-peasant economy without introducing any changes in the existing labour process or land use. This seems puzzling in the context of an economy undergoing a high degree of commercialization.

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<sup>32</sup> For a similar picture of functional specialization and differentiation among merchants in north India, see Bayly, 1978: 151-73.

One fruitful way of looking at the problems of merchant-peasant linkages and that of usury in the small peasant economy of Bengal in the late eighteenth century is through the distinction, introduced by Marx, between "formal and real subsumption" of labour to capital. For Marx, "formal" and "real" subsumption of labour to capital were both based on the investment of capital *in* production and on the appropriation of *surplus-value* from *within* the process of production. But conditions of "real subsumption" could only be realized historically by a structural change in the very *essence* of the labour process by which *capitalism* crystallized as *the dominant* mode of production<sup>33</sup>; no such preconditions were necessary for labour to be *formally* subsumed to capital. Under the latter, capital took over and exploited "an *existing labour process*, developed by different and *archaic* modes of production" without reconstituting them in any major fashion<sup>34</sup>. "*Technologically speaking*, the *labour process* goes on as before, with the proviso that it is now *subordinated* to capital"<sup>35</sup>. The economic structure under conditions of "formal subsumption" was one of "capital's mode of exploitation without its mode of production"<sup>36</sup>.

For Marx, under conditions of "formal subsumption", capital takes an existing form of labour, intensifies its hold over it, extracts surplus in a variety of forms from the labour process but *does not* take over the labour process *itself*, nor does it introduce any major changes in technology, or land use in the case of agricultural production. Since capital does not organize a new mode of production, but takes over and controls an anterior one, appropriation of the surplus can only take place by a

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<sup>33</sup> Karl Marx, 1981: 1020-31.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid: 1021; emphasis Marx's.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid: 1026; emphasis Marx's.

<sup>36</sup> Marx, 1986: 732.

plethora of compulsions being placed on the primary producer. The existence of usury as the dominant form of capital is only natural in a subordination of this type. A loan is simply an advance of raw materials or implements, or both, in the form of money charged with a heavy interest through which the producers' surplus is henceforth appropriated. Two pre-conditions historically necessary for "formal subsumption" were (i) expanding internal trade and (ii) an increasing inability of the small producer to sustain production without external financial help<sup>37</sup>. The history of Bengal in the late eighteenth century confirms the existence of these two situations beyond any reasonable doubt.

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<sup>37</sup> Marx, 1981: 1020.

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